Chapter VII

What Do Employees Think about Electronic Surveillance at Work?\(^1\)

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the unintended effects that accompany the use of information technology for surveillance in the workplace, in particular the negative (panoptic) effects. The extent and nature of electronic surveillance in the workplace are outlined, and the metaphoric and theoretic grounds for the study of panoptic effects are summarized. Data about the meanings that employees derive from the practice of electronic surveillance and about the feelings they have about it are presented and discussed.

Introduction

In the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, information work and the information technology that accompanies it are redefining the work experience
in both developed and developing economies. Among the most profound changes in the workplace has been the advent of vastly increased electronic surveillance. Some have argued that such surveillance is needed for productivity or to protect employers from legal exposures caused by how employer owned information technology is used. Others have spoken out against increased workplace surveillance, some on moral grounds and some for other reasons.

In any case, it is clear that electronic surveillance in the workplace is an increasingly important and contentious issue that is commanding the attention of public policy makers, managers, and employees alike. This chapter continues a line of work that focuses on a seldom-discussed aspect of electronic surveillance in the workplace — the unintended effects that accompany the use of information technology for surveillance. While such unintended effects of workplace surveillance can be both positive and negative, this chapter focuses its attention on the unintended negative effects, which we call panoptic effects, and which we are concerned may, in certain cases, actually outweigh the intended benefits of surveillance. In this chapter we seek to find out whether negative feelings on the part of employees could be one panoptic effect of surveillance and, if such feelings exist, whether they are based at least in part on a meta-communication function of surveillance.

This chapter adopts the same basic metaphoric and theoretic foundations as Botan’s (1996) monograph, but it differs in several important ways. Unlike that piece, the current chapter triangulates, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches for, we hope, increased validity. Because of its qualitative database, this chapter might also serve in part as a qualitative validity check on the findings reported in 1996. Finally, this chapter also reports on new panoptic effects.

The first section of this chapter provides background information about the extent of electronic surveillance in the workplace and related issues. After discussing the metaphoric and theoretic grounds of this research, the final section presents and discusses data about the meanings employees derive from the practice of electronic surveillance and how they feel about it.

**Electronic Surveillance in the Workplace: An Overview**

This section of the chapter provides an overview of the issues associated with electronic surveillance. After reviewing the parameters of surveillance and
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Role of Self-Efficacy and Collective Efficacy as Moderators of Occupational Stress Among Software Development Professionals