Chapter XIII

Personal Autonomy and Electronic Surveillance in the Workplace

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Abstract

In this chapter we suggest a significant cause for concern about electronic surveillance in the workplace, namely the moral and political value of personal autonomy and the threat to personal autonomy posed by the use of electronic surveillance. We explore the significance of psychological aspects of personal autonomy (psychological autonomy, for short) and argue that individuals may be conceived of as having rights to psychological autonomy that extend to the workplace. We then argue that, in certain
circumstances, electronic surveillance in the workplace may undermine psychological autonomy, thereby infringing upon workers’ rights to psychological autonomy.

Introduction

The development in recent years of a wide range of new electronic surveillance technologies has reignited controversies concerning the benefits and harms of employee monitoring in the workplace. With electronic surveillance technologies, employers and managers are given new opportunities to monitor workers and to use electronic surveillance in serving the goals of their organisation, such as increasing productivity and profit. Employers and managers have also acquired capacities to monitor aspects of workers’ behaviours that previously went unmonitored, such as computer keyboard activity and many nuances of behaviour. Surveillance extends to aspects of behaviour not related to workplace performance, such as the content of personal e-mails and behaviour during breaks. Electronic surveillance has been added to the repertoire of more direct forms of observation that have been used in workplaces for centuries; its unobtrusiveness and comprehensiveness both have raised concerns.

Concerns about the ethics of electronic surveillance have been prominent in the business ethics and management studies literature in recent years (Ball, 2001; Foord, 2002; Lyon, 1994; Miller & Weckert, 2000; Shapiro, 1999). These concerns focus particularly on workers’ privacy, control over workplace tasks and conditions, and more practical issues such as the potential of surveillance to lower levels of trust and morale in the workplace. In this chapter we suggest another cause for concern about electronic surveillance in the workplace: the moral and political value of personal autonomy and the threat to personal autonomy posed by the use of electronic surveillance.

We do not defend the broad claim that the use of electronic surveillance in the workplace is intrinsically wrong or unjustified, but we defend a somewhat narrower claim. Our claim is that electronic surveillance is morally wrong where it is used by employers or managers to facilitate coercive or manipulative changes to workers’ values insofar as this involves an attempt to undermine or distort their personal autonomy. We argue for this claim by providing an abstract argument that certain types of manipulations of others’ values are morally wrong, because they infringe on individual rights grounded in the moral value of personal autonomy. Working from this conclusion, we consider the potential uses of electronic surveillance as one part of an apparatus for the manipulation of workers’ values.
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