

Essay on influence of workforce surveillance on managing people at work

[Business](#), [Employee](#)



Introduction

For most companies, employee monitoring is perceived as a necessity.

Employee monitoring is understood as an act of watching and monitoring the actions of the employees in the workplace during working hours. In this paper, surveillance in the workplace is considered as a form of employee monitoring.

Allen et al. (2007) defined surveillance as the “few watching the man” whereby the employers decided to use surveillance technology to monitor any or all of the employees’ messages and physical behaviors. The use of surveillance technology to monitor employees’ activities is not a new issue in the workplace. In fact, advances in surveillance technology have further enhanced the ability of employers in monitoring employees’ activities in the workplace. D’Urso (2006) as cited by Allen et al. (2007) stated that the availability of sophisticated (electronic) surveillance technology have increased the ability of the managers to map and influence employee communication. Employers now uses the GPS technology which enable them to determine the exact location of employees; others use devices that monitor workers’ productivity; and other use devices that enables the employer to observe/watch the employees while at work. According to Cripps (2004), most organizations in Australia allocate and spend more money on workplace surveillance equipment than in other industrialized countries.

The use of surveillance in the workplace is obviously beneficial on the part of the employers especially that the surveillance technologies currently

available are sophisticated making workplace monitoring very efficient. However, the opposite may be true for the employees. The adaption of high-end surveillance technologies could be perceived as unethical by the employees. As mentioned by Cripps (2004) there is a growing sense of unease among employees and interest groups as to the ethical limitations that the technologies may surpass. It is feared that the new technologies will leave employees open to discrimination and abuses, and also that such surveillance in the workplace poses a threat to the dignity and privacy of employees. Sewell and Barker (2006) as cited by Allen et al. (2007) presented that there are two ideological arguments that dominate the literature in workplace (electronic) surveillance: surveillance as coercive control and surveillance as caring. On the one hand, the use of surveillance in the workplace is argued as necessary to expose and force deviant employees to work hard. On the other hand, surveillance is viewed as a form of caring that tends to protect the organization in general from the lazy, disruptive, and/or incompetent workers.

In this paper, the influence of workplace surveillance from the perspectives of employers and employees are discussed.

Employers Perception of Workplace Surveillance

The idea of workplace surveillance as a legitimate and significant factor in the operation of an organization has already been accepted especially by employers. There are four identified arguments in favor of the use of surveillance in the workplace. First, it is argued that the use of surveillance gives the employers the ability to protect themselves and their property from

security risks created by employment. As a way of resolving security threats, employers have the right to install surveillance devices such as cameras, access codes, and proximity cards to protect the organization's premises from property threats like arson, sabotage and vandalism, to reduce the risk of extortion by employees, and to minimize the risks of theft.

Second, employers perceived surveillance in the workplace as a way of reducing the organization's exposure to liability risks. It is a fact that significant legal obligations are borne by employers. Instances that make the employers liable are employees misconduct (e. g. deformation, computer hacking, violation of securities laws, workplace harassment and discrimination). The use of surveillance technology like internet and e-mail interception that allow for telecommunication monitoring and access to stored or deleted files in the employees' hard drives reduces the possibility of litigation. Moreover, under the Occupational Health and Safety regulations, it is the responsibility of the employers to protect the well-being of the employees. Hence, the use of surveillance in the workplace enables the employers to constantly monitor and ensure the safety of their employees while at work.

Third, according to Cripps (2004), through quality control and performance evaluation, the employers perceived the surveillance as a way of improving the productivity of employees in in the workplace. For example, the use of surveillance devices like GPS or cameras helps employers to determine if the employees leave their desks/posts, where they go and for how long. Also, there are surveillance devices that record the number of phone calls the

employees take, the keystrokes of made, or the typing speed which determine employees' efficiency.

Finally, other employers perceived that the use of surveillance is to control the costs (e. g. downloading of irrelevant material off the internet, calling of friends or stealing merchandise). Employers believed that surveillance in the workplace is an effective instrument in reducing if unnecessary expenses.

In sum, from the point of view of employers, surveillance in the workplace is very significant in managing people and monitoring is legitimate because of security, liability, productivity and efficiency reasons. The use of surveillance devices allow them to have the control over the operation of the organization especially in terms of monitoring operations. Though surveillance requires investments on sophisticated technologies, the gain in the long-term is perceived to be greater than the incurred costs of acquiring and installing the devices.

Employees Perception of Workplace Surveillance

On the point of view of employees, there are potential dangers that go along with the use of surveillance in the workplace.

For one, employees argue that the availability of surveillance data has the potential to be abused by employers. Most employees perceived that employers have the tendency to incorrectly use the data (e. g. employees' violations in the use of computer and/or telecommunication policies of the organization) which will then serve as a mechanism that will trigger any form of abuses in the workplace such as discrimination and unfair dismissal.

According to Cripps (2004), a number of cases in Australia confirmed this unfair practice of using surveillance data to dismiss employees: (1) Ansett Australia Ltd dismissed an employee for using its email facilities to distribute union bulletin in the time of industrial dispute; and (2) a discrimination case was also charged against Bankwest for dismissing an employee who had distributed a dirty joke while only merely demoting another employee who downloaded stored and transmitted soft porn by email.

Second, in instances where the use of surveillance data is not abusive, it still may have negative effects on the employment relationship.

Workplace surveillance results in increased pressure on employees to meet performance levels results in increased stress, lower morale and even resentment. Moreover, using surveillance to monitor employees may damage mutual trust between employees and management thereby creating suspicion and tension in the workplace, and as a consequence, the employment relationship will be obviously adversely affected. The presence of distrust in turn will result to increased greater discontent, industrial dispute, and a less effective workforce, thereby contradicting one of the reason of utilizing surveillance devices, i. e., to ensure efficiency of employees at work.

The greatest concern of employees regarding the use of workplace surveillance is that such monitoring system is an absolute example of invasion of employees' privacy and dignity. Privacy is perceived by most individuals as their right to personal space. For employees who have been monitored through surveillance technologies in the workplace, this right to

personal space no longer exists. As mentioned by Cripps (2004), there are extreme cases where surveillance has been utilized in toilets, change rooms, locker rooms, showers and other supposedly private spaces where employees can enjoy some degree of privacy. Employees perceived these particular instances as not only embarrassing but also abusive. Allen et al. (2007) further emphasized on the invasion of employees' privacy. According to the authors, regardless of whether (electronic) surveillance technologies are used by employers as a form of control or of caring, employee privacy may be eroded.

Many employers feel that it is their right to intercept and read their employees' private emails and voicemails. But employees often feel that their rights are being violated if their personal email have been intercepted and read without their permission. This issue gave rise to ethical considerations regarding the right to privacy.

Conclusion

In this paper, the perspectives of both the employers and the employees on workplace surveillance were taken into consideration. There is widespread acceptance of the use of surveillance in the workplace on the part of the employers. In particular, surveillance in the workplace is very significant in managing people and monitoring is legitimate because of security, liability, productivity and efficiency reasons.

Two arguments were also presented by employees against the use of surveillance in the workplace, that is, the use of monitoring system through surveillance technologies tends to be abusive and coercive on the one hand,

and caring on the other hand. Nevertheless, there's the element of privacy which is being violated.

As employers become concerned with proper employee behavior and compliance to the Code of Conduct in relation to their industries and related organizations and as they are also becoming more positive in using monitoring devices to keep track of the actions of their employees, some employees feel that the use of too much monitoring is a violation of their right for privacy.

References

- Allen M. W., et al. (2007). Workplace surveillance and managing privacy boundaries. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21 (2), 172-200.
Retrieved from http://coms.publishpath.com/Websites/coms/images/Research%20Participation%20Docs/Watkins_Allen_Myria.pdf
- Cripps, Alison (2004). Workplace surveillance. Retrieved from <http://www.nswccl.org.au/docs/pdf/workplace%20surveillance.pdf>
- Sewell, G., & Barker, J. R. (2006). Coercion versus care: Using irony to make sense of organizational surveillance. *Academy of Management Review*, 31, 1-24.