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Monitoring remote employees: Implications for HR

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Abstract

Purpose: More and more organizations have resorted to the employment of monitoring software to keep track of employees' everyday performance and task completion. The current article outlines the capabilities, pros, and cons of monitoring for employees. Several recommendations for HR professionals are outlined to inform best practice.
Approach: The article summarizes recent literature and trends on electronic monitoring aimed at remote workers, focusing specifically on trends observed in the UK and the USA.
Findings: The number of pros and cons, as well as the resulting recommendations for HR professionals, outline how technology may aid – but also undermine – performance.
Originality: The summary of capabilities, pros and cons represents a snapshot of current monitoring practices. The recommendations will give readers an overview of all the aspects and factors that ought to be considered when monitoring software and related tools are selected.

Keywords: data management, human resources, monitoring, risk management, surveillance

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Introduction

Productivity monitoring has been around for well over forty years. The advent of remote working across many industries and countries in recent times has gone hand in hand with a significant increase of monitoring software being employed by organizations keen to keep track of their employees' time and work. The current article outlines the capabilities of such systems, describes some of the pros and cons for the adoption of such software, and several HR implications for practice and policies.

Remote work monitoring: Capabilities and approaches

Professionals working in HR departments are often tasked with advising managers in all departments on aspects such as performance management (processes and best practices), appraisal and reward management. The adoption of monitoring software may support these processes in numerous ways by delivering indicators of how employees spend their work time and how they compare to others on specific tasks. A quick review of remote working practices here will provide clarity as to what such monitoring software can deliver in terms of information.

Today's monitoring software can monitor employees' keyboard strokes, mouse movements, visited websites, take screen shots/webcam shots every 10 minutes, monitor email use, email content, and even transcribe the content of phone calls. Other options include the monitoring of attention an employee pays to screen content, a minute-by-minute time line that can be reviewed by managers, and mirror displays (where the content of an employee's home screen is displayed on another device). Furthermore, different software keeps track of file transfers and the kind of applications that an employee is or has used. Location monitoring is a common feature as well, as is the monitoring of surroundings where employees work.

Many of these software programs will log out inactive users and send reminders to start working again within a specific time frame. Productivity scores and employee categorization (into productive or unproductive employees) automate the process of performance tracking for many managers. In addition to software specifically designed to monitor employees, many video conferencing tools are being deployed to watch over employees on a continuous basis (e.g., via Zoom, Skype, Google Meetup) and to monitor if employees are continuously online (e.g., Slack, Microsoft Teams).

The capabilities of single or combined programs are therefore so extensive, that they allow for continuous and extensive monitoring of every second of every workday, both in the office but now increasingly within their own home environments. This monitoring has, however, far-reaching consequences for employees' experience at work.

Monitoring employees: Pros

Monitoring software can add value in several ways. For managers and team members alike, it can provide a means to support communication (especially when the teams are large and distributed), team coordination and provide assistance when it is needed. Some features will particularly be helpful to managers, others more to teams and the individuals themselves.

Managers can track how employees are progressing and help employees when necessary with developmental feedback (Jeske & Axtell, 2015). They notice when some tasks are delayed or need to be reprioritized. In addition, monitoring information on task progress can help them to allocate new tasks on time – and in line with capabilities of the employee. Such records may therefore, with the right understanding of the job and performance context of the employee, serve as inputs for performance appraisals. Similarly, managers may find some features useful

that allow them to check on a larger, distributed team (e.g., attendance, tardiness, team-based projects). Many software packages can be applied to different devices, especially when employees use different devices.

There are some benefits that apply to individual team members. Given the right permissions, they themselves can check their progress and see how they compare to others. In some systems, they can further moderate what is reported back to the managers (e.g., by checking which screen shots were captured). Especially for highly repetitive, routine jobs where tasks are easily timed and quantifiable, such progress tracking can provide employees with a mean to work towards and become visible as top performers. Being able to keep track of one's tasks can promote accountability among employees for their areas of responsibility.

That said, there is a fine line between monitoring for productivity and the indiscriminate surveillance of all employee activities that are not justified based on their job role, job complexity, or criticality of their output. In those cases, trust in management and teams may quickly be undermined. In ordering for employee monitoring to lead to the appropriate outcomes (specifically productivity and effectiveness), employers need to balance their own needs (e.g., the want to control and record work activities and productivity) with employees' desire to be valued and trusted by their employers (Bernstrøm & Svare, 2017). This brings us to the other side of the coin when it comes to employee monitoring and surveillance.

Monitoring employees: Cons

Close and unpredictable employee monitoring has been shown to negatively impact employees' self-efficacy and reduce organizational citizenship behaviors (voluntary helping behaviors; Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015). When employees are aware that they are monitored, they feel less trusted and more powerless. This lack of trust and mistrust is further spurred by reports that some monitoring software can be installed without the employees' knowledge. This results in lower morale and increased turnover intention. Contextual performance is also known to drop as team-trust declines. Employees similarly tend to perform more poorly when they are required to solve complex problems, or solve problems creatively, as performance is often impaired on such tasks when monitoring is intense.

Another issue concerns the ability with which some systems set conformity and nondifferentiated performance goals. This may be particularly problematic for new hires or hires who are not able to work at the same pace as other workers. The possibility of discrimination increases, possibly undermining diversity initiatives aimed at recruiting workers with different backgrounds, skill levels, and circumstances (e.g., working parents who are temporarily working from home). Depending on the nature and degree of monitoring, as well as nature of the business and professional profile of employees, some staff may be open to accept extensive monitoring of all their activities and interactions.

The use of continuous video monitoring is disconcerting given that many employees who work remotely do so involuntarily. Many recent remote workers do not have a designated office space in their home environment, which means the video conferencing is capturing aspects of their private lives that employers have no legal right to intrude. The prevalence of video monitoring means that naturally occurring interactions in the home (such as children interacting with their parents, breast feeding, and similar) are all now captured on screen for employers. It is difficult to see how such technologically supported and continuous 'home invasions' can be morally or ethically acceptable to employees, especially when data access and transparency are not been clarified (Hagen et al., 2018). Such experiences are unlikely to promote commitment, work engagement or trust in management.

Other unintended effects have likewise been reported. Some employees feel that the quantification of all output is dehumanizing, likening their input to those of their machine.

Others report work intensification. This can result in overwork and even burnout as employees skip taking their breaks in order to keep pace with rising performance standards. The lack of contextual cues and further performance-relevant information can easily lead to misattributions and misunderstandings. Some employees similarly report that the monitoring employed at work can conflict with the values promoted within the organization (e.g., a strong team focus vs. individualized performance tracking). When monitoring violates trust and mutual agreements, the likelihood increases that the organization becomes less attractive to new talent, inadvertently thwart employee voice and undermine employer branding efforts. Future data breaches may now reveal sensitive information about the organization as well as employees' home environments, home networks, and home security. What is more, the monitoring tools' data capturing features may also capture information about clients and customers. This then may generate new problem when it comes to safeguarding or removing their information from monitoring data records.

Stepping in and stepping up: Recommendations for HR

When advising managers and employees, HR professionals are often in a situation where they need to balance pros and cons – for their employers as well as the employees. The following recommendations provide some starting points for professionals in HR. The adoption of monitoring software and tools may be prompted by managers or professionals in the HR departments.

When managers are interested in adopting monitoring, one of the first steps to consider is the broader use case for the use of various monitoring tools. HR professionals can play an important role by encouraging an honest and open discussion about what motivates managers to adopt such tools. Such a discussion will help all stakeholders to explore if the use of monitoring will serve the company and employees well and clarify how the captured data will be used (Al-Hitmi & Sherif, 2018). In some cases, HR departments may themselves initiate the debate about monitoring, especially when the data that could be generated are viewed as supporting HR processes (related to development, appraisal and promotions rounds). At this stage, the input of employees – and other employee representatives – need to be consulted in order to test the situational boundaries and appropriateness of different monitoring features given the activities that would be monitored (see Abraham et al., 2019). In addition, industry, professional, and cultural differences should also need to be considered in terms of how employees respond to monitoring (Abraham et al., 2019; Bernstrøm & Svare, 2017). By law, varying by jurisdiction, many more stakeholders might expect to have a say on how and when employees are monitored.

Secondly, once the goals and use cases have been identified and agreed upon, the next step will require HR professionals or other competent colleagues to identify suitable software and required features that will be needed in order to achieve said goals. Where opt-in and opt-out will be provided, these options need to be openly discussed. Some software may need to be customized to be appropriate in consultation with employees who will be monitored. Aspects such as break times and downtimes similarly need to be considered in line with health and safety guides and working time directives. The co-creation of monitoring can ensure that the monitoring is suitable to the performance setting (e.g., when individuals work on their own vs. in teams, in different settings, and similar). This collaborative effort can be extended to identify the right metrics to assess the use and effects of the software on critical individual, team, or organizational outcomes (e.g., turnover, efficiency, morale). This ensures that monitoring does not dispirit teams or undermine trust in management (Bernstrøm & Svare, 2017).

Third, as soon as a consensus can be reached about which kind of monitoring will be applied, a few guardrails need to be employed to ensure that the monitoring is implemented in

the way intended. All current and future employees need to be informed that monitoring will be employed and in what form. All managers and employees need to receive training and have access to various feedback options for employees and to evaluate these new initiatives (Al-Hitmi & Sherif, 2018; Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015). Some monitoring initiatives may need to be readjusted over time, so there need to be channels and means to collect this information. This is particularly important considering that the monitoring likewise reveals employees' tendency to skip breaks in order to meet some – potentially too ambitious – predefined goals. My recommendation would be to regularly review and appraise the merit of employee monitoring. Projects, teams, and organizations go through cycles – and so do different HR practices and tool use.

There are a few aspects that need to be thought throughout the process. For example, several contextual and personal circumstances may be worth considering. Remote employees who are working from home temporarily lack a home office. Many of these employees have care responsibilities, which will require them to take breaks when the need arises (e.g., for breast feeding or family meals). This can be addressed by manages by relaxing preset working hours in monitoring systems. This allows employees to work their hours while allowing them to juggle other responsibilities. Allowing employees to opt out of video-based desk monitoring entirely, or while they take breaks, will minimize the privacy invasion that video monitoring presents. Ensuring that both mothers and fathers are given the same flexibility and options will encourage working couples to share the workload of working and managing the needs of their family more equally.

Furthermore, device and data management need careful consideration, from both an HR, legal and IT perspectives. Some concerns here pertain to data breaches, data access restrictions, and data ownership. Many employees use a variety of devices for work when they work remotely. This may include private devices with very different security settings and content than work devices. Where remote employees have temporarily no other choice than to use their own devices, monitoring software and tools should be carefully customized. For example, one option could be to allow the employee to turn the monitoring off and on during the workday, and limiting the ability of the software to capture screen activity, web cam shots, and limit device use to only those activities and hours during which the personal device is used for work purposes.

Concluding remarks

Many existing HR policies written for on-site work will not cover these instances or provide guidance to managers, so this will be an important area for HR professionals to revisit as their proportion of remote employees in the workforce grows. In HR settings, there is a continuous need to reflect on trends and how technology is used to manage people and production, in order to identify how these aspects affect HR guidance, create new issues and knowledge gaps. Only by embracing a stance whereby HR professionals are continuously tracking change – rather than being administrator guardians of procedure – will the appropriate HR practices, learning and development initiatives prepare employers to deal with emerging challenges to how we work, how we manage, and how we access productivity and organizational effectiveness.

As more and more tools are being adopted and designed for employer use, it is worth reflecting on how well current HR policies and practices capture all the ground that needs to be covered. Similarly, the determinants of both confidence and trust of managers in their companies may need to be revisited at certain intervals. Leadership behavior, as well as cultural values, can both play an important role in shaping which monitoring options are selected – and what kind of intended or unintended consequences these choices will generate for employees' experience within the organization. As a result, it will be relevant to future proof potential

policies by examining emergent issues. Similarly, by regularly auditing the effectiveness of HR policies and practices, new issues that arise to the selection of certain vendors or software for workplace monitoring can hopefully be addressed before they become problematic for the organization.

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