

How to monitor remote workers — ethically

Article

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The rise of employee surveillance: and how you can monitor remote working ethically

Remote work is here to stay: not a short-term trend, a solution to COVID-19 that will dissipate when society reopens. But rather, a fundamental paradigm shift solidified the moment Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey encouraged employees [to work from home forever](#). Influential companies, including [Google](#), [Facebook](#), and [Square](#) followed suit — and as move these early adopters, so do the rest: [88%](#) now mandate their employees to work from home. The benefits of which are sizeable: workers no longer experience tedious and stressful commutes, meaning time, [the equivalent of nearly 400 hours year per employee](#), is invested back into the working day, resulting in productivity improvement across [77% of the workforce](#).

But, coupled with this productivity rise is an alarming surge of employee monitoring, as a guise to scrutinise productivity. While workers have long been aware of managers tracking the content of their emails and social media accounts, meeting records, timesheets, who they met with, and how they utilized their workspaces, now, the stakes are a lot higher. Because, since COVID-19 sent unprecedented numbers of people to work from home, thousands of firms, including [PwC](#) have panic bought spy software dubbed "tattleware". [Sneek](#), for example, takes webcam pictures of workforces as regularly as every minute and uploads them for seniors to scrutinize. Another system — [InterGuard](#) — takes pictures as often as every five seconds, all because bosses in the office-free world increasingly desire evidence, including screenshots, login times, and keystrokes to ensure workforces are productive. Such evasion isn't isolated to one sector, and white-collar workers are not the only quantified workforce: [long-haul truckers](#), for example, are being prescribed devices that monitor their location and vehicle speeds — supposedly to help schedule their sleeping and driving periods.

This may sound Big Brother and Orwellian. But it is legal for firms to scrutinize the workforce in this way, so long as they disclose they're doing it, and it is ethical to do so: managers claim these measures provide a valuable library of information, helping them understand and improve organizational productivity. However, many workers disagree and harbour concerns regarding privacy and security. Because even though they are designed to ensure productivity, surveillance tools may reduce it for those workers who don't feel trusted — in fact, many are now finding novel and creative ways to evade executive gaze: Anti-surveillance software, for example, is experiencing a boom. Take [Presence Scheduler](#), which can set a Slack status as permanently active. [Sales and traffic doubled in the first two months of lockdown](#), confirming a big fightback from employees against their employers. But in response, many workers are now required to remain logged into a video call all day while they work.

So, amid this growing discourse, which side is right?

To answer this question, we studied 1,000 firms across 17 countries between April and August 2020 to understand the rise of surveillance, deducing how managers should monitor remote working ethically, as not to antagonize employees. Triangulating data from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and surveys, enabled us to conclude despite both sides holding reservations of the other, there are several fundamental steps that firms should take to monitor remote working ethically. These are explained below:

- 1. Employees and employers must first accept that remote working is here to stay.** Consequently, workplace boundaries must be reset and redefined because expecting employees to produce deliverables during fixed hours while working from home requires productivity on managerial terms, not necessarily employees'. And this means, when

surveillance is introduced, management can appear both controlling and authoritarian: our research suggests an exchange must occur to maintain equilibrium. And that's why firms offering a [flexible](#) or [shorter working day](#) achieve the lowest levels of push-back against management: 86 percent of their workers told us surveillance is an acceptable trade for greater autonomy; in fact, most welcome it, with surveillance supporting this new style of working.

2. Managers should engage the workforce to agree which business activities actually require monitoring, and ensure the benefits of doing so are understood. Then, everyone of all hierarchical levels must learn how new systems would act in a proportionate and justified manner - there must be no other suitable, less intrusive option. Because if surveillance is to be ethical, there must be reasons for monitoring individuals more than just out of curiosity or to intimidate. For back in the days of traditional office working, tried and tested ways to monitor workforces included colleague accountability and regular face to face time. So, if it's felt by management that the same monitoring methods, albeit virtually, are inadequate, it may be necessary to introduce some surveillance. But when introduced well, for example, our research observed that surveillance focused predominantly on enhancing the customer experience, rather than scrutinize internal operations, generated sizeable ROI. Take freelancers and contractors, [including Lawyers](#); many now use time tracking tools to provide concrete proof of time spent when billing clients - a level of transparency like never before, which has significantly improved client trust by 42 percent. Whereas we identified surveillance not focused on enhancing the customer experience does not produce ROI in more than 75 percent of firms - a sizable waste of valuable resource.

3. Ensure sufficient safeguards are introduced to prevent abuse. It's human nature to run away with ideas; we have to be mindful of that. Therefore, precautions should consider the extent and intrusion of monitoring; if surveillance occurs outside of working hours or on annual leave, invasion of privacy entails. Furthermore, if employees live in open-plan flats or bedsits, increasingly common in large cities such as London, New York, or Hong Kong, they are forced to invite employers into their home and living space - managers must be mindful of this. Additionally, full discretion must exist regarding how and where data is stored, because legal restrictions apply in specific sectors, such as healthcare. For example, 72 percent of managers told us that captured data was encrypted and stored for up to three years. Access to it was allowed only to the surveilled person and managers. Our research found these safeguards acceptable to more than 86 percent of employees if reviewed regularly to maintain pace with the rapid progression and use of technology. But, without such review and iteration, only 8 percent supported them.

4. But even when safeguards are in place and reviewed continuously, discrimination can still occur. It is crucial that every workplace group receives fair and consistent levels of monitoring; for example, those most junior must not be surveilled to a greater extent than their managers, or at least not to a degree that causes unique burdens. Because if any employees receive disproportionate, irrational levels of surveillance relative to others, this would indicate unethicalness. And that's why policies that state "we monitor all employees" ensure equal application of discrimination laws. That being said, although surveillance provides a record of work undertaken by individual employees - making it easier to dismiss false allegations that may arise - the data collected can lead to other discrimination cases: we found that more than 65 percent of surveillance programs sift through browser history and can deduce whether employees are pregnant, unwell, or a member of a union, which, if mistreated, could be used when deciding who to promote or dismiss. So, to ensure bias does not contaminate executive decision making, 82 percent of firms take measures to safeguard those managing and analyzing

captured data on direct reports that are separate from their managers - a Chinese Wall. But within 22 percent of firms that operate this type of separation, we still found managers attempting to access restricted material, which raises a critical issue: Trust, or their lack of.

5. Above all, employees and employers must rebuild trust levels that existed before remote working commenced. Without trust, surveillance significantly divides workers and managers: more than 92 percent of employees under surveil trust employers less. And 81 percent of managers trust workers less. This must be addressed. To do so, our research suggests using surveillance as an interim or supplementary measure only: altering the hiring process is a better, sustainable solution. Because managers who hire those skilled in managing time and schedules negate the need for monitoring. For as 72 percent of employers told us, fear of employees wasting time drives their suspicion. And so, expectations on new hires demonstrating this quality eliminates the need to surveil. One CEO told us, "we have no desire to babysit our employees. We'd much rather evaluate our team members' output as opposed to how they spend their day. But until we know our workers can operate in this new world, we need to be sure."

The last word

And so, while it's encouraging to observe firms pay closer attention to their workforce's productivity, our study recommends setting goals and expected outcomes through autonomy leads to better results, rather than operating surveillance software. For the more responsibility and accountability workers feel, the more empowered and productive they will be. If remote work is to be successful, workers need tools to collaborate and share their presence. And that means firms should invest in systems that aid collaboration and empower employees to be more productive at home; based on trust, not surveillance. After all, if managers look after the workforce, they will in turn look after your customers. And isn't that what business is about?