



Research Article

**REVIEW OF PROS-CONS POLEMICS OF WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE: SURVEY
COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS**

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 13th November, 2018
Received in revised form 11th
December, 2018
Accepted 8th January, 2018
Published online 28th February, 2019

Key words:

Workplace behaviours, electronic surveillance,
employee monitoring, data protection, privacy
invasion.

ABSTRACT

Given the present scenario of the rapid advancement of information technology and the consequent communication explosion, a wide range of techniques and methods are used to monitor employees - on/off-the-job. Employers increasingly collect (store and further use) data on employees – both workplace behavior and personal information – to benefit the business, raising significant concerns over employees. Many of the current scholarship in this milieu seems to lack the proper impact assessment. This article, after conceptualizing workplace surveillance along with a review of its pros and cons, compares different surveys and studies conducted on employee surveillance and makes a critical analysis of its consequences. It implies finally an attitudinal change and behavioural transformation through improved commitment and self-responsibility for an improved workplace benefiting for both the employers and employees alike.

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INTRODUCTION

The extensive use of Information Technology (IT) and communication devices in the organizational workplace increases today the multiple forms of surveillance on employees. Inexpensive and user-friendly devices and techniques are available today and are implemented in the workplace to control, monitor, and process information about employees and also about work and workplace, and expose it to the public. Reasoning of an invisible digital panopticon is experienced in the workplace and hence the presence of a digital Big Brother. Data protection laws and other constitutional and federal regulations and acts set out rules about the circumstances (ways and means) in which workplace monitoring takes place. However, a proper impact assessment is lacking in many of the current researches done in this milieu. The surveys of American Management Association and other such academic and non-academic agencies during the last decade conducted specifically on workplace surveillance demonstrate the desired and undesired effects of these practices and the issues to which they give rise. Since employers and employees possess different rights and interests that often appear in contrast to various situations, the impacts, consequences and the goals achieved determines the worth and value of this practice. This article, after conceptualizing

workplace surveillance along with a review of its pros and cons, compares different surveys and studies conducted on employee surveillance and makes a critical analysis of its expected and actual consequences and outcomes.

Workplace Surveillance: A Conceptual Review

Surveillance is the act of carefully watching someone or something especially in order to prevent or detect a crime. It is a well “focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction, and which directs its attention in the end to individuals” (Lyon 2007, 14). For Lyon, surveillance is focused, means intentionally employed with a purpose. By systematic, he means that attention to personal details is not random, occasional or spontaneous; it is deliberate and depends on certain protocols and techniques. This surveillance is routine in that it occurs as a normal part of everyday life in all societies (Lyon 2007). It is the fact or possibility of being observed by someone else (Stahl et al. 2005; Beu & Buckley 2001). In the same line, surveillance could be thought of as “systematic attention to a person’s life aimed at exerting influence over it” (Rule et al. 1983, 223). Electronic surveillance is generally understood as the gathering of information of employees by surreptitious, secret and stealthy means using electronic devices. It is an inconspicuous observation of or snooping on persons, places and activities using electronic devices such as cameras, microphones, tape recorders, or wire-taps, and more intrusively by monitoring of internet, email, and other web activities.

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In the work context, surveillance refers to “management’s ability to monitor, record and track employee performance, behaviours and personal characteristics in real time (for example, Internet or telephone monitoring) or as part of broader organizational process” (Ball 2010, 87). Therefore, workplace surveillance refers also to the intended activities of observation to collect and record employees’ data and information, often done either in a systematic or an ad hoc way by using electronic and other technological means (Mitrou & Karyda 2006). Legal systems of various countries permit employers legally monitor employees, as the new General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) of European Union evidently exhibits. Employers implement usages of video cameras (CCTV), audio-visual sensors, night vision goggles, wiretapping, phone-tapping, electronic tagging, biometric access devices, reading of postal mails, drug testing, DNA analysis, computer monitoring including email reading, GPS (Global Positioning Systems) tracking and RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) transmitters, and more (Marx 2007). Along with the expressions of electronic surveillance or monitoring, words such as spying, snooping, electronic spying, sneaking, espionage, prying, and Big Brother are used to mean the same in a workplace context. It is surprising to see that these consistent language choices in writings reflect a negative attitude towards electronic surveillance.

Review of Pros and Cons of Workplace Surveillance

Workplace surveillance is regarded as part of organizational behaviour and a management technique to ensure quality service and increased productivity in organizations guaranteeing protection from theft, legal liabilities (avoid mortgages) and over expenditures due to fraud, dishonesty, or misconduct (Ball 2010; Marx 2007; Allen, et al. 2007; Sewell & Barker 2006; Findlay & McKinlay 2003; Lane III 2003; Ariss 2002). It is linked to the condition to provide safe and secure ambiance and unbiased environment in the workplace (Zweig 2005; Botan & Vorvoreanu 2005; Ariss 2002; Rule & Brantely 1992). It confirms the proper use of place, hours and properties of a given job or organization and differentiate employees who are and who are not pulling their weight and expose the ‘dead wood’ workers who neglect their fair share of the work (Sewell & Barker 2006; Mujtaba 2003; Miller & Weckert 2000). It is said to motivate employees to do their jobs more effectively and make them feel accountable in their work as the collected data is increasingly used to coach employees for better performance in the workplace (Miller & Weckert 2000; DeTienne 1993).

It prevents employees from sabotaging and disrupting the modes of production (Saval 2014). For, the process of unbiased fact-based feedback, performance appraisal and evaluation and goal setting through monitoring is supposed to enable the workplace enhancement (Zweig 2005; Miller & Weckert 2000; Neihoff & Moorman 1993; Worsnop 1993; Smith & Amick III 1990). Researchers discover an association of high performance with employee monitoring and writes that workers monitored more frequently perform better than unmonitored workers (Bhave 2014). This shows that monitoring is used in effect as a supervisory resource, which can discourage undesirable behaviours and promote desirable ones (Sewell & Barker 2006; Zweig 2005; Oliver 2002). In a nutshell, trends such as financial pressures and risk factors have driven the increase in monitoring.

Nevertheless, the supervisory use of electronic monitoring of employees’ performance becomes often detrimental to these expected benefits on account of privacy, fairness and autonomy concerns (Bhave 2014). For, it also invades employee’s reasonable expectation of privacy, lowers morale and causes to sneak around, complain and quit (Ciocchetti 2011). Individual privacy concerns one of the key issues raised by organizational workplace surveillance (Moor 1990). When introduced without adequate justification, consultation and controls, surveillance practices have been shown to cause behavioural bondage in the workplaces deteriorating organizational culture by challenging conventional understandings of the relationship between the employer and the employee and of technology and human life and by suffusing the workplace with power relation (Simpson & Byrski 2010; Kizza & Ssanyu 2005; Zweig 2005; Stanton 2000). Increased use of computer and internet-based monitoring will only make prosecution of transgressions more difficult and cannot stop the wrong behaviour (Martin & Freeman 2003). It is pointed out that surveillance negatively affects employee feelings about work and workplace and reduces their motivation to improve the quantity or quality of the work (Yerby 2013; Danielson 2005).

Besides, it forces employees to act and even think according to the requisites of the actual or virtual observer – employer or the management, encroaching employees’ personal and intellectual space whereby their creativity and freedom shrink drastically (Martin & Freeman 2003). It also produces measurable outcomes in terms of targets met or service levels delivered regulating personal behaviours and characteristics more subtle way that leads to greater workload dissatisfaction, less control over their jobs and less fairness of their work standards (Ball 2010; Smith et al. 1992). It affects employees’ trust among themselves and towards the managements and makes them feel demeaned by submitting to decision making responsibility to the information system, which in turn increases absenteeism (voluntary absence) and turnover (Pfeffer 2007; Zweig 2005; Wilborn 1998; Amick & Smith 1992). Unrestricted surveillance leads to the considerable decrease of the actual control over one’s information and inhibit maturity keeping the observed in a childish state (Martin & Freeman 2003). This creates an air of suspicion over others, injects hostility into the workplace, forms mistrust among co-workers, and becomes counterproductive causing resentment among employees.

Likewise, affecting the self-determination and self-identity, it jeopardises and imperils employees’ mental (stress, high tension, extreme anxiety, intense depression, increased boredom, etc.) and physical (musculoskeletal problems, carpal tunnel syndrome, etc.) health leading to fatigue and other chronic havoc and turmoil (Kizza & Ssanyu 2005; Lund 2002; Martin & Freeman 2003; Nissenbaum 2001; Severson 1997). Similarly, problems related to ‘data mining’ (analyzing data from different perspectives and summarizing it to derive useful information) and ‘identity theft’ (a person disguises or pretends someone else by assuming their identity in order to attain some resources or benefits in that person’s name) are on the rise more than ever before (Quinn 2005). Adjacent to this, within the environment of monitoring and information tracking, comes cyber-bullying (using information technology to harm or harass the people in a deliberate, repeated, and

hostile manner) by which employees are threatened in multiple ways of denigration (Hinduja & Patchin 2010; Siegle 2010).

It is also researched that through surveillance, employees experience different treatment from both management and fellow workers increasing differences and reinforcing existing inequalities, which diminishes organizational commitment *per se* (Hongladarom 2005; Zweig 2005). When all activities and information are electronically monitored, either with or without proper consent, this poses a grave threat to employees. The surveys and studies examining workplace surveillance practices at different levels are reviewed below to capture the entire picture that is prevalent today.

Workplace Surveillance Survey Comparison and Analysis

A study conducted by Allen et al. regarding workplace surveillance reveals that 68% of respondents feel that the surveillance is beneficial, while 17% gave a mixed reaction, 10% appeared ambivalent and 6% were sad. However, among those who indicated surveillance as beneficial or necessary, 74% are managers while only 56% are non-managers (Allen et al. 2007). This means that, from management perspectives, employee monitoring is needed to sustain a competitive and productive workplace. However, most employees do not want their every sneeze registered and monitored, even for legitimate business reasons illustrated by the management. Studies and surveys conducted by the American Management Association (AMA), which compared and analysed multi-year data on workplace monitoring found that employee surveillance significantly and steadily increased year by year. This was shown to produce several both predictable and unanticipated effects on employees, management and society at large. Surveys conducted in 2001, 2005, and 2007 specifically concern employee monitoring and surveillance.

The 2001 survey of the AMA reports that 82% of employers use some form of electronic monitoring in the workplace, which, by 2005, became 76% for tracking internet usage alone, and another 65% employers use various software to block inappropriate websites. In the 2007 survey, 66% of employers reported monitoring internet connections and 65% used different monitoring software and other devices. In the same vein is the experience of the increased monitoring practices such as email monitoring (43% in 2007; 55% in 2005; and 46% in 2001), watching on content, key strokes, and time spent in keyboard (40% in 2007; 36% in 2005; and 20% in 2001), video monitoring (48% in 2007; 51% in 2005; and 33% in 2001), telephone tapping and monitoring (45% in 2007; 51% in 2005; 9% in 2001), and voicemail monitoring (10% in 2007; 15% in 2005; and 9% in 2001). The *exhibit-1* given below show the diagrammatic representation of the same. In the 2001 survey, a total of 435 respondents participated, while a total of 526 and 304 organizations participated in 2005 and 2007 respectively.

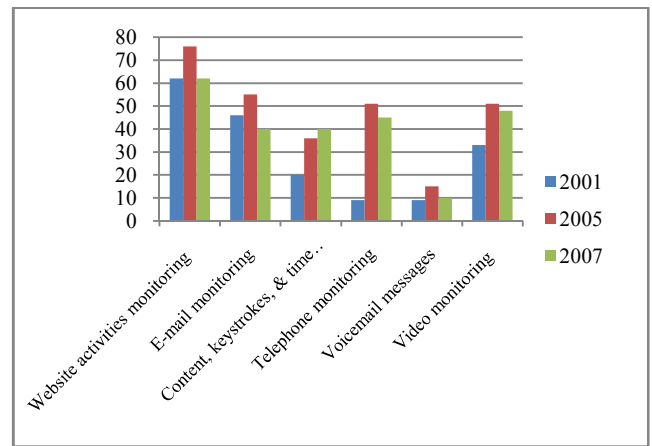


Exhibit 1 Percentage of Monitoring

The *Center for Business Ethics*, likewise, analysing ASBBS Annual Conference proceedings in 2003, asserted that as many as 92% of all organizations electronically monitor track their employees in some form (Coultrup & Fountain 2012). In most cases, employees are provided with extensive details about monitoring practices. According to the 2007 survey (AMA, 2008), 83% inform workers that the company is monitoring content, keystrokes and time spent at the keyboard; 84% let employees know the company reviews computer activity; and 71% alert employees to e-mail monitoring (Yerby 2013). At the same time, even without advanced electronic intimation, there is an automatic electronic trail created by all transactions done in and through the internet and other electronic devices that allow others to peep into our lives at any time they wish. This is a discomfoting fact that both employers and employees often forget. The 2007 study by the American Management Association about monitoring reminds us that monitoring has become commonplace in the workplace. As the survey shows, 66% of employers monitor employees' website activities; 43% review their employee's emails; 40% analyse other communications; and 45% monitor audio calls (AMA 2007).

Among the 586 companies participated in the 2009 Electronic Business Communication Policies & Procedures Survey (ePolicy Institute & AMA 2009), 24% are with 100 or fewer workers, 22% with 101-500, 10% with 501-1000, 8% with 1001-2500, 8% with 2501-5000, and 29% with 5001 or more. This survey surprisingly suggests the relevance of employers' security concerns, citing that 14% of employees admit to misusing proprietary information and intellectual property of the company by means of external third-party communication, and an additional 6% engage in transmitting customers' primary and confidential data to outsiders. Moreover, 61% of businesses use policy governing the extent of exposure of company secrets and confidential information; another 41% have policies pertaining to business-related social networking sites, and 54% regulate personal social networking sites during work hours.

Regarding the use of social networks, 60% of business executives surveyed by Deloitte, LLP in 2009, expressed a belief that they have the right to know their employees' activities online. However, in contrast to that, 53% of employees feel "social networking pages are none of an employer's business" (Deloitte LLP 2009). In 2009 AMA survey, 40% of organizations establish written e-mail etiquette

(netiquette) policies and 30% launch guidance for cell phone and language uses in internal and external communication. Netiquette is a portmanteau word denoting network etiquette or internet etiquette. It refers roughly to the informal rules of the internet usage and behaviour adjacent to it, reminding the do's and don'ts of online communication. The deplorable irony, however, of interest in our discussion here, is that both intended and unintended fraudulent activities and misbehaviours still continue and alarmingly grow regardless of prior warnings and precautions.

Furthermore, and more to the point here, according to the 2005 Electronic Monitoring & Surveillance Survey, 26% of organizations reported to having fired an employee for Internet-misuse, and 25% reported doing so for email-misuse (Coultrup & Fountain 2012; DePree & Jude 2006). The 2007 Survey (AMA, 2008) found a consistent increase in cases of employee firing (more than one fourth of employers interviewed have fired workers for misusing email, and one third for internet misuses) and incited some reasons including violation of company policy (64%); use of inappropriate language (62%); excessive personal use of company assets (26%); and breach of confidentiality rules, etc. (Yerby 2013). In 2009, 26% of organizations fired employees for e-mail misuses and policy violations (as compared to 25% in 2007 and in 2006, and 14% in 2001), and an added 26% organizations terminated workers for internet misuse (as compared to 25% in 2004, 22% in 2003 and 17% in 2001). Our point in quoting these figures is to note that the AMA surveys from 2001 to 2009 show that employee surveillance has been significantly increased and is continuing rapidly to do so. The *exhibit-2* shows that the mere perception of being monitored and that punitive actions will be taken after detection of a crime does not alleviate the multiple threats that arise. There is a decrease in the expectation of fraud-detection through employee monitoring, and it is less likely to hinder its occurrences.

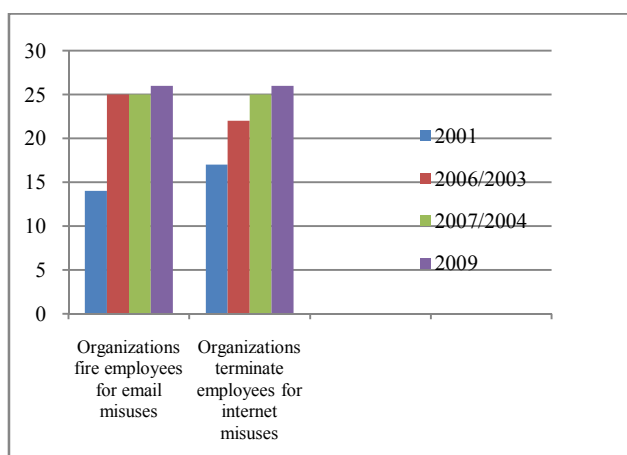


Exhibit 2 Internet and E-mail misuse

Rules and regulatory measures are more and more being implemented to govern and control employee behaviour and to retain business particulars in various situations, especially concerning litigation, productivity, risk alleviation and security preservation. As described by Johnathan Yerby (2013) and S. McEvoy (2002), however, one persistent and, in fact, mounting dilemma in workplace monitoring is that despite employees' being well informed about monitoring, many still let their guard down and commit acts that subject them to disciplinary action. This reminds also the inadequacy of

surveillance practices, which again brings the scope of further research in the discussion of the effectiveness of surveillance practices.

The data from the 2012 Australian Electronic Workplace Survey of 500 randomly sampled employees expose that electronic monitoring and surveillance practices provide new challenges in the workplace. Analysing a range of personal, job and workplace characteristics the data have identified a negative relationship with trust in management (Holland et al. 2015). This study showed that the more monitoring and surveillance practices are introduced the more feeling of employers as being deceptive and the more decreased perception that management could be trusted to make sensible or competent decisions. The increased monitoring induces a negative view of management and hence lower relationship between employees and management and less willingness to engage creatively with management and production (Holland et al. 2015). Also when the a workplace improvement is measured only on quantitative data, and when continuous monitoring is meant to this type of assessment, very often employees compromise with the quality of their work.

A 2018 survey on Workplace Privacy & Protection by the HR Metrics & Analytics Summit validates the most employees' feelings that it is inappropriate and unacceptable to monitor personal, non-work-related activities, and physical movements around the workplace (HR Metrics & Analytics 2018; Burjek 2018). The survey found that 80% of organizations are using employee records and data to measure employee performance. Among the respondents, 85% agrees that organization has set privacy and security guidelines regarding what employee information is collected, and how it is stored and used appropriately. However, almost 48 percent of employees don't trust their organizations or company to protect the collected data. According to this survey, it is acceptable for most people to be monitored for work-related tasks (79%), work-emails (77%) and work phones (75%), while private social media accounts (72%), physical movements (57%), personal information (46%), personal interactions (56%) in the workplace are mostly unacceptable. Although employees consent to monitoring and data collection for a better-designed workplace and employee incentives, they express their grave concerns of privacy and oppose to being monitored through personal sources.

Recent researches in Indian context also show that the use of active monitoring systems in workplaces is increasing and that the performance and communications of employees are under strict scrutiny for multiple reasons (Indiparambil 2017). In this study, 88.6% of respondents acknowledged the presence of electronic monitoring systems in their companies. It also reveals that employees occupy totally different attitudinal and behavioural patterns when they are and are not under surveillance. Employees resist in different ways such workplace systems and strategies. They give overriding importance to privacy and data security, freedom in their job, securing the trust of their employer and enjoying impartial treatment in the workplace (Indiparambil 2017). Hence, external monitoring has not been shown to increase productivity or efficiency in the workplace, and crucial variables such as trust, commitment, efficiency and performance are unrelated to any type of monitoring. This study affirms also the need to explore the negative effects of workplace surveillance on employees and in particular the

ethical threats posed to employee rights. Electronic monitoring from an employee's perspective, is not a viable solution for workplace problems.

CONCLUSION

From audio-video surveillance to computer monitoring and to GPS satellite tracking, employers increasingly use technology to manage productivity and protect resources. Workplace surveillance is viewed as an inevitable and yet very controversial issue due to its hailing multiple rights and interests of both employers (security, productivity, efficiency, performance, legal liability) and employees (privacy, autonomy, dignity). The negative impacts of workplace surveillance often surpass the expected benefits of surveillance. For, the excessive monitoring becomes detrimental and unfavourable to employees in several ways invading their privacy and disturbing their physical and psychological serenity and by emphasising solely on speed and other merely quantitative measures and measurements. From employees' perspectives, surveillance often invades privacy; violates civil liberties and freedom and results in a loss of employee power. It requires behavior modification in response to monitoring. The element of trust in employer-employees relationship is endangered. The use of surveillance should be balanced and cost effective and must weigh interests and rights of all stakeholders concerned in an organization, not alienating anyone on any of the socio-economic and social grounds.

A comparative and critical reading of different surveys on workplace surveillance and employee monitoring reveal that there is no substantial change or decrease in the misconduct of employees even after implementing a wide range of monitoring systems and practices. Quite on the contrary, indeed, misbehaviour and fraudulent activities increase in many of the organizational contexts. Identifying and firing employees guilty of misconduct is not, therefore, a tenable and justifiable solution, and recognizing this opens a new and plausible avenue for the integration of ethical principles and practices along with moral behavioural and character formation, which we argue will bring an attitudinal change and hence a behavioural transformation and improved commitment, responsibility, accountability and productivity.

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How to cite this article:

Jijo James Indiparambil (2019) 'Review of Pros-cons Polemics of Workplace Surveillance: Survey Comparison and Analysis', *International Journal of Current Advanced Research*, 08(02), pp. 17277-17283.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijcar.2019.17283.3232>
