

Working from home

Spooks in your machine: rise in WFH monitoring drives dissent

Surveillance of staff at home or in workplaces can be counterproductive, researchers argue



Employees are increasingly monitored, whether at home or in workplaces © Getty Images/iStockphoto

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When staff began working remotely, early in the Covid crisis, employers rushed to install monitoring systems to keep an eye on them. But researchers are now warning that these programs can make employees less productive.

Monitoring grew in popularity during the first lockdowns as executives sought to check on employees that they feared might be watching television, playing with their kids, or cooking during business hours spent at home. By using software tools to track when workers were actively using their computers, how long they spent on websites, and who they were corresponding with, employers claimed they could ensure staff were connecting to their work and each other.

However, both employees and academic researchers now say that such systems are more likely to degrade corporate culture than boost efficiency.

According to a study published in the *Journal of Management*, US workers who know that they are being watched digitally tend to take more breaks, work slower, and steal more office equipment than peers who work independently.

“The promise of these systems is that they coach employees to be more efficient,” says Karen Levy, a professor of information science at Cornell University in the US. “But, in practice, a lot of these tools do not actually create efficiency, they just move some of the inefficiency on to the workers by making them spend time worrying about how long they take in the bathroom.”

How and what [employers monitor](#) varies widely. Some organisations use keystroke loggers to track how much employees type, while others use their laptops’ built-in webcams to monitor facial expressions. Other remote technology takes screenshots of employees’ computer displays, while chat software, such as Slack, can be used to see who a particular worker speaks to most.

Vendors argue that such technologies can provide executives with critical information about their teams. Data analyses can reveal which employees are most crucial to operations, catch those planning to defraud the company, warn if a worker is socially isolated, and even predict when a staffer has started to think about quitting, according to software developers.

But, in her study of long-haul truck drivers who were monitored with onboard sensors and cameras in their cabs, Levy found that they had more accidents than truckers who were not being watched. The problem, she says, is that aspects of a driver’s performance that can easily be measured — fuel mileage, frequency of breaking, and eye flutters — are different from those that actually make them safe drivers.

“We often see people . . . using imperfect proxies to track employees,” Levy notes. “It’s harder to measure creativity.”

The same is likely to be true for white-collar workers, Levy adds. A system that rewards the account manager who sends the most emails might tempt workers to send frequent low-quality messages instead of fewer, better thought-out communications that result in more sales, she explains.

Such findings have not stopped companies from implementing monitoring systems, though. The number of large employers using tools to track their workers doubled between 2020 and 2022, according to research by consulting firm Gartner. By last year, 60 per cent monitored their employees, and that number is set to rise to 70 per cent over the next three years.

As a concept, it is not new: employers have been surveilling their staff for decades. Monitoring employee productivity was a method used by engineer Frederick Taylor to revolutionise US manufacturing in the early 20th century. More recently, digital monitoring became common in low-wage workplaces — it is a central complaint in union negotiations for Amazon warehouse workers and UPS drivers. Financial services groups and freight companies have also used monitoring software to ensure regulatory compliance.

But the Covid crisis led to an explosion of “productivity paranoia” in corporate America. Some 85 per cent of business leaders surveyed by Microsoft say that the shift to hybrid work has made it challenging to trust that staff are being productive.

Employees’ response has been almost entirely negative. On Twitter and TikTok, irritated remote workers swap tips on how to outsmart so-called “tattleware.” A common tactic is to purchase a \$30 mechanical “mouse jiggler” to prevent your laptop appearing inactive. Others recommend using Gmail’s schedule send feature so you appear to be sending emails throughout the day.



US Senator Bernie Sanders addresses the Amazon Labor Union last year — digital monitoring is a central staff complaint © Victor J Blue/Bloomberg

US Senate Democrats also took aim at workplace monitoring this month, introducing [legislation](#) aimed at forcing companies to disclose the information they collect about their employees and the surveillance they carry out on workers' device use after hours.

Still, employers who deploy this software, and the companies that produce it, both argue that workers should welcome monitoring because they can use performance data to their advantage.

Kon Leong, chief executive of unstructured data management platform ZL Technologies, says he wishes that he had more data earlier in his career to prove his value when he was the sole Asian working on mergers and acquisitions at an investment bank.

"I had delivered twice the revenue with half the headcount, and I felt I was short-changed, even then," Leong says. "Had the monitoring system been in place, it would have been a lot clearer."

And there are ways employers can make surveillance more effective, according to Jennifer Nahrgang, a professor at the University of Iowa's Tippie College of Business. Monitoring tools best improve productivity when they are used to give employees developmental feedback on the tasks they naturally do — but do not mandate changes to natural working patterns, she says.

Employees are also less likely to try to game the system when they are given a say in how it is set up, Nahrgang finds.

“If [surveillance tools are] used to control, then they take away an employee’s autonomy, which is one of the strongest predictors of job satisfaction and performance,” she points out.