Employee Monitoring

More and more, companies are collecting data from their employees and using it to uncover new insights. These data take many forms. For instance, using its Office 365 platform, Microsoft can tally how often employees use chat and email functions, and can use calendar information to measure employee productivity and work-life balance. McKesson Corp.—a pharmaceutical wholesaler—once examined the sender, recipient, and timing of over 130 million emails to better understand networks of employee relationships. Companies monitor employees in real time, too: over 2,000 employers use Teramind's monitoring technology which provides live information regarding what is on an employee's screen to classify productive versus unproductive hours. With many companies allowing their employees to work from home due to the pandemic, such data collection and monitoring trends are only likely to continue.

At the center of this practice is an ethical dilemma that illustrates the complexities and tradeoffs of leading and managing in the modern workforce. Proponents of company data collection efforts claim the data they collect are crucial for maintaining high performance and providing value to their stakeholders—the ethical principle of viability. For instance, with these data, companies can better allocate resources, spot problem employees, see who is driving effective team performance, and who may be likely to quit. Adding to these claims are legal arguments: because employees are using company equipment, employers say they have a right to monitor their activity.

However, this practice is not without controversy. Monitoring and collecting employee data may violate ethical principles of respect and transparency, especially if employers do not disclose what information they collect. In addition, there is no guarantee that companies will not accidentally collect information that is traditionally private, such as health information or the types of after-work activities an employee enjoys. Further, critics say that the data the companies do collect may present a biased picture of an employee's activity which can become problematic if it is used to make certain decisions like performance bonus allocation. Lastly, there is the issue of trust—seemingly invasive monitoring and tracking can signal to employees that leaders and managers do not trust them to work on their own.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. Collecting employee data and closely monitoring activity should be avoided.
2. Collecting employee data and closely monitoring activity should be a common business practice.

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