



Chapter IV

Electronic Monitoring in the Workplace: If People Don't Care, Then What is the Relevance?

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Abstract

This chapter will start with a discussion of three different pieces of research concerning surveillance. The first study looks at the perception of surveillance by some of those people who supervise and implement it; namely, information systems or information technology professionals. The next study investigates students' perception of surveillance in their university, while the last one is an in-depth study of two organisations with regard to surveillance. The combining factor of these three studies is that the subjects do not necessarily see surveillance as problematic. Given this surprising finding, this chapter will recount the arguments for and against surveillance

as found in the literature. This will lead to a discussion of the reasons why individuals often do not seem to mind surveillance, despite good evidence that it may be psychologically, morally, socially, and even economically harmful. The chapter will end with a discussion of what these findings can mean for people interested in surveillance.

Introduction

Electronic monitoring and workplace surveillance are topics of interest to scholars in a wide variety of disciplines ranging from the fundamental, such as sociology and philosophy over the specialised computer and information ethics, to the applied topics, such as information systems. Recent technological developments, particularly the increasing ubiquity of computers and networks, as well as the convergence between different technologies, have created a whole new range of ways in which we can try to find out what others are doing. The area in which these activities are probably most prominent and widespread is that of the workplace. Employers have an interest in what their employees are doing for a variety of reasons ranging from ensuring that employees are spending their paid time productively to fears of becoming legally liable for inappropriate online behaviour.

As one can see, the area is complex and allows a variety of approaches. Electronic workplace monitoring can be seen as a legal problem, a moral question, a social conundrum, and many more. Accordingly, one can find numerous publications that address the problem from different angles, offering conceptual clarification, empirical data, or both. One thing that most of these publications have in common is that they start with the assumption that monitoring is in some sense problematic, and then they attempt to offer some sort of solution or clarification. The authors of this chapter are all involved in this sort of research regarding the ethical or social side of monitoring. And during the research, we encountered something that puzzled us and motivated us to write this chapter. During our empirical investigations into electronic monitoring, we found that a very widespread initial reaction of many of our respondents who were monitored in one way or another was that they did not see it as a problem. The dilemma at the bottom of this chapter is thus that despite the fact that monitoring is generally recognised by academics as being problematic, the people who are faced with it do not, as a general rule, share this perception.

This chapter will therefore attempt a different approach to what is classically done in academic writings about surveillance. Typically, articles on surveillance will give an overview of the literature, identify a problem in the existing literature,

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