"A Study on Employee's perception on Employee Monitoring"

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Abstract

Employee monitoring is a long-debated topic. Employers argue that monitoring is their way to protect business interests while employees would say that it's a breach of privacy. On the whole, it involves many legal and ethical issues at the core of which lies technology and its use. There are many articles in view of both sides and some looking into the resulting effects. In this paper, we focus on the perception of employees about employee monitoring and to what extent is it ethical for employers to monitor their employees. Our study of 122 sample respondents found that the majority of employees are fine with being monitored with technology, and even prefer it to physical monitoring, but employees are overall wary about the security of their private data in the hands of the employer. Thus, this paper attempts to find the balance between employee monitoring and ethics.

Keywords: Employee Monitoring, Privacy, Ethical Perception.

Introduction

Employee monitoring is, defined by Wikipedia as, "the act of employers surveying employee activity through different surveillance methods". Traditionally, employers used to hire managers to overlook employees to ensure that they aren't slacking off and being productive. It was a source of motivation to keep working when someone was watching them. Additionally, the manager would keep a log of how much work was actually done by an employee and would be able to account for it.

When the use of technology was introduced in business in the late 20th century, surveillance cameras and ID logging machines as well as desktop timers, slowly began to replace work-overseeing managers. Within a few decades, technology has advanced to a whole new level. Now there are all sorts and forms of surveillance, from monitoring employee's activities online, to having access to their browsing history, sometimes even their mail accounts which are linked to the organization, and the use of various software. On the other hand, their physical activities may be observed, without employee's awareness through hidden cameras or other devices.

What began as a way to monitor employee activity, has become much more than that. Currently, employee monitoring isn't just about ensuring that employees are productive. Since technology is both a boon and a bane, it works like a double-edged sword. While technology helps to better the functioning of an organization and provides more opportunities for business, the same technology when unmonitored can be used by employees to breach security.

Where the extreme type of monitoring through the use of technology is considered as a breach of privacy by employees and individuals alike, the biggest concern for business is the security or rather, the access to sensitive information that employees have. And while leaking sensitive information is not just an ethical issue but also legal, there are other unethical practices by employees such as using company resources for their personal use. Employees are particularly known to use the Internet for browsing entertainment and online shopping (Yerby, 2017).

An American Management Association shows a rise in the number of companies monitoring employees from 1997 by 45%. Meeting compliance, ensuring productivity, protecting inside information – all of these require employee monitoring. Verizon's 2017 Data Breach investigations report reveals that almost 25% of employees have involved in breaches, many times unknowingly and sometimes with intent.

On the other hand, employees may feel a breach of privacy with such kinds of monitoring. A clutch report, 2020, reveals that only 10% would trust their employer if they were monitored by a software while 22% were concerned by the employer's access to their personal information. This shows that using technology to monitor employees not just adds to stress regarding work but also causes the trust between employer and employee to be lost.

Even in the current situation of COVID, it is noticed that there is a rise in the use of employee monitoring software, even though employees are at home. Ultimately, this paper aims to find out what is the point up to which employee monitoring remains ethical and how technology can be used consciously and ethically without creating more ethical issues.

Review of Literature

Rosengren and Ottosson (2019) say that employee monitoring is a technique used to track employees' activities during working hours. This surveillance captures employee's performance, attendance, and online activities. As per their report, women spend more time using other URLs which is related to shopping sites, social media, etc., when they use other websites during work time, they tend to cross their work deadlines and be non-responsive to customer queries.

Martin (2021) found that employee monitoring software helps the company to increase employee productivity, reduces wastage of time, constant supervision, honesty, and transparency in work, monitors team efforts, ensures that employees don't violate any rule and that the company information is safe. It is legal to have employee monitoring in an organized workplace with certain limits in checking the phone calls, voice mails, emails, and internet which are followed as per company policies. Cyber loafing is a tendency where employees tend to use the internet and time other than for work purposes during work time. Some employees don't feel the organization is interrupting their privacy when they are monitored but few employees feel unsecured that their personal information might be misused by the employer.

Yerby (2017) observed the legal and ethical issues in an organization which expresses the need for employee monitoring by employers with technological advancements, employees need access to more technical

resources of the organization specifically computers and internet access, which could be misused for non-business-related activities which decreases productivity and could also be used to access and leak sensitive information leading to losses in business. Thus, arises the need for employee monitoring. As for employee's privacy, it is the employer's duty to inform and explain to the employees that their work movements are being tracked physically and virtually, and the need to do so, in order to not just protect their privacy but also to create a safe work environment.

On the other hand, Manokha (2020) contradicts the justification of the violation of privacy, wherein employers in the name of monitoring employee's gain access to all their movements, activities, and even their personal information which could then cause them to judge employees, treat them unfairly or even fire them. Further, the advancement in technology has given rise to different ways of monitoring that the employee may not even notice, thus easily allowing the employer to exploit the employees' privacy. He observes that the traditional monitoring involved managers physically watching the employees but the current employee monitoring is done with the use of Artificial intelligence and algorithms which see everything as black and white, without analysing other factors which not just stresses the employee but also gives an overall unfair report, leading to the employee having to work more than he/she is being paid for.

Chang, Liu, and Lin (2015) found that employee monitoring has both positive and negative impacts on the psychology of employees which affects their productivity. Trust plays a major role between employees and employers. When there is no trust and no privacy, employees tend to be stressed so they leave the organization.

During the pandemic employees were asked to work from, the emergence of employee monitoring helped the business companies' managers to keep the track of employees work in remote areas Freedman (2020). When a survey was conducted in 2020 regarding employee monitoring in work from home 15.5% of employees wanted to work at the office whereas 58.25% in mere future wanted to work from home. this indicates how employee monitoring benefited both employees and employers. Employers should abide by the law likewise they are responsible to provide employees with a safe working environment. HRs duty in every company is to make sure that there is security for employees, problems are sorted, ensure no security breach, misconduct, and that the organization's assets are safe. Organisation tries to balance with company assets and meeting employee's expectation when it comes to privacy by considering their interests. Technology is a tool used by the organization to monitor employees.

Liu and Lin (2015) studied how employee monitoring is made compulsory in companies to monitor employee performance, ensuring the confidentiality of company information and track illegal activities. Initially, 50-60% of employees were against phone calls and video monitoring. Employees argued that some activities of theirs would not be able to be differentiated as personal ones. Employers need to be reasonable and private information shouldn't be accessed. This creates stress in employees when they feel insecure about their personal information. Employee monitoring is legal but it depends on the organization and how they implement it in their company.

Yerby (2013) feels that in this current era, technology is the only tool that can support the company to monitor the employees. The employer is liable to provide a safe work environment and also to educate and inform the employees about how they are being monitored by considering their privacy. There are certain limitations expected from the employer while monitoring. Employers should be responsible, reasonable, and shouldn't misuse personal information. Employees should be punished if they violate the rules.

Kiser, Porter, and Verquist (2010) find that employee monitoring is a controversial topic when it comes to the ethical part. According to employers, employee monitoring is considered to be legal because this is the only way for employers to make sure the employees don't misuse the technology as well as it helps in increasing productivity. Whereas on the other hand employees feel that they are not being trusted and moreover, they are breaching their privacy.

Research Gap

The observation drawn from the review of literature by research scholars has helped in identifying the gap. Technology is a key tool that has played a major role in monitoring the employees inside the organization as well as in remote areas, especially during the pandemic. Employee monitoring is considered an ethical practice in the eyes of the law. It becomes illegal when an employer crosses their limitation by misusing employees' data and privacy. It is also observed that there are very few literature reviews on our study that is related to Work from Home during Covid-19.

Objectives of the Study

- To know employee's perceptions on employee monitoring in the workplace.
- To interpret our study from an ethical perspective from the employees' point of view.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted with a view to access employee's perceptions on employee monitoring done by the employer in the organization. The data collected for the study is primary data, which was collected by using a structured questionnaire method consisting of 16 different questions. The total responses resulted in a sample size of 122 participants. The responses were expected from currently working individuals or individuals who have worked for at least 1 year time period, as responded to participate in the research process in order to account for reliable data.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

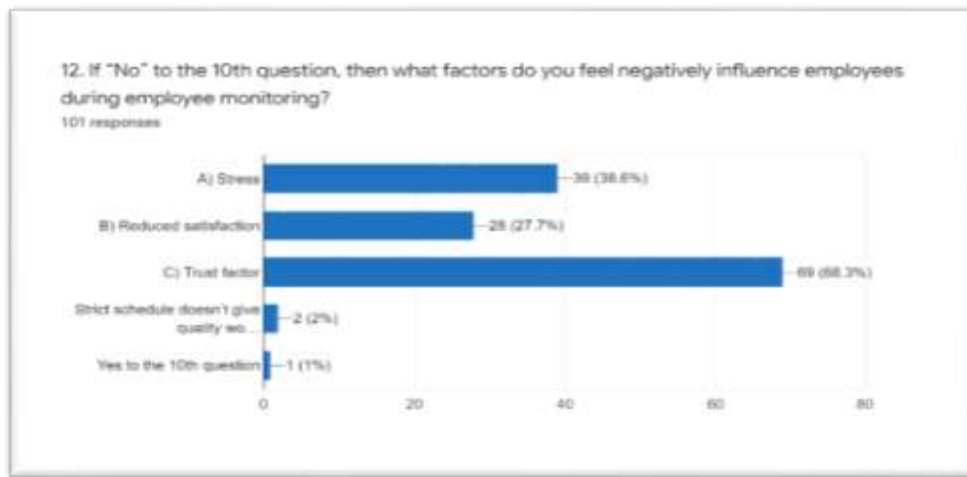| Questions	Responses		
	(Yes)	(No)	(May)
1. Are you aware of different forms of employee monitoring used by the employer to monitor the activities of employees. such as Access to log keystrokes typed, application and website usage, detailed file usage, incoming and outgoing chats and e-mails, internet connections, windows interacted with, internet packet data, desktop screenshots, software installations, etc.			
- The above question & results prove that the employees working in their organization are being notified with different types of employee monitoring software and devices that are used by them in the due course of track the actions of the employee. But the other half of the sample was not aware of the different forms of monitoring systems incorporated in the organization. Any monitoring actions taken by the organization should be informed to the employees if not, it affects the legal aspects of the policies adopted by the organization concerning the act of employee monitoring.	52.5%	26.2%	21.3%
2. Does your organization monitor you via surveillance and have access to your email and internet usage history?			
- By taking into consideration of aspects such as surveillance & access to email and internet usage, the results depict that the employees are being monitored and employers have access to the employee's data, from the data with the consolidated percentage of 101.6 with the breakthrough of (68%+33.6%). And also having an equal proportion of 68.1% in being not monitored.	101.6% (Consolidated)	68.1%	30.3%
3. As an employee do you feel employee monitoring is required?			
- With a maximum of 39.3% of the employees feel that employee monitoring is required in the organization and 25.4% of employees feel employee monitoring is not required.	39.3%	25.45%	35.2%

4. Do you feel employee monitoring invades one's privacy by collecting sensitive information through monitoring and using it against employees negatively?			
- The main factor which concerns the employee concerning the act of employee monitoring is invading of personal data of the employee, having to support this statement 89.3% think that employee monitoring would lead to invading of personal data of the employees. And 48% of the sample feel that their data won't be invaded by the employer through employee monitoring.	89.3% (consolidated)	48.4%	62.3%
5. Are you comfortable with being monitored in the workplace?			
- 31.1 % of the participants feel that they are comfortable being monitored by their employer. 44.3% (54 participants) are not comfortable with being monitored in the workplace.	31.1%	44.3%	24.6%
6. While joining the organization where you informed your actions would be monitored using any type of monitoring system in the organization?			
- A group of 83.6% of employees has been informed by their employers in the employee monitoring process. 89.3% of the major sample population were not informed regarding the monitoring action carried by the organization.	83.6% (consolidated)	89.3%	27.1%
7. Does employee monitoring positively influence an employee, if "yes" then what factors do you think that positively influences an employee/ If "no" then what factors do you think negatively influence an employee during employee monitoring?			
- The results for the questions, state that 69.2% of the employees feel that the right way of monitoring helps in improving the responsible level of the employees, and on the other side of respondents with 68.3% feel that employee monitoring leads to trust issues and affects the employer, employee relationship in a negative way.	30.3%	25.4%	44.3%

The above question was framed to find if there is any positive influence on employees through employee monitoring working in the organization, in which 30.3% of the population, that is, 37 out of 122 respondents feel that employee monitoring can positively influence an individual. And 25.4%, which is 31 respondents of the total sample size, were of the view that employee monitoring results do not exactly result in a positive sense. But the result derived from the response concludes that majorly employee monitoring results in a positive influence on employee's perspectives.
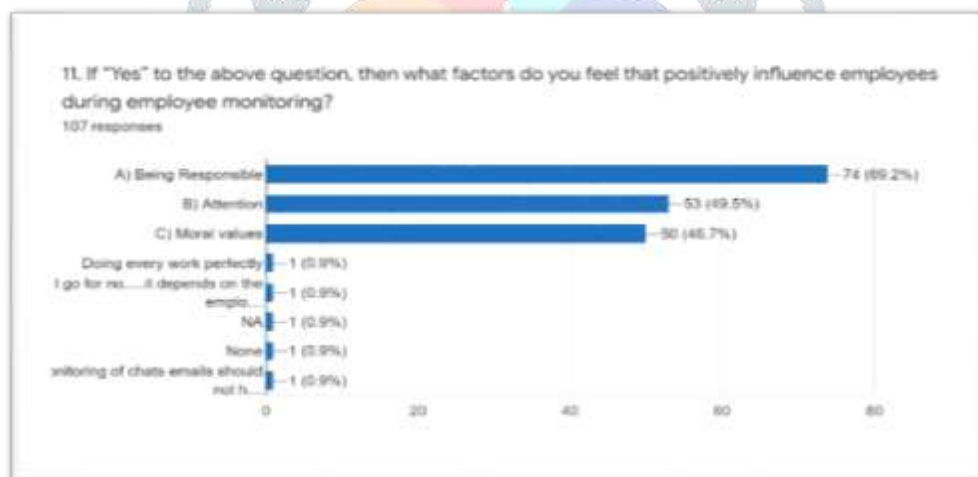

Statement supporting the 10th question's response 'Yes', which is a continuation of the above question, asks for any above-mentioned factors or to specify any other factor from the respondents. This resulted in a majority of 69.2% of participants opting for option A) Being responsible, as the factor that is positively influencing the employees through the act of employee monitoring. This result is connected with the articles referred to in the study stating that employee monitoring helps in reducing the organization's resources and influences the employees to act responsibly. The other two factors such as Attention and Moral values of the employees are also governed and influenced by the monitoring aspects of the organization.

Statement supporting to the 10th question response 'No', which is a continuation question asking for any of the above-mentioned factors or to specify any other factor from the respondents supporting the fact that employee monitoring in the organization negatively influences the employees. From the above results, it is evident 68.3% of the employees lose trust in the organization when they are being monitored by their employer which may result in a lack of attention, reduced in moral values, increased absenteeism, or increases negative thoughts by the employee also acting irresponsibly in the operations of the organization. So, the organization should consider the ethical aspects of the employees before taking strict decisions on aspects like employee monitoring.

Concerning privacy aspects of the employees, the participants with 42.6% have trust issues in the data collected by the company through the employee monitoring process, assuming that their data may be misused by the organization by later affecting the employability factor, right to privacy, legality, loss or misuse of personal data, etc. These are major factors which concern the employee about the act of employee monitoring in the organization. And 24.6% of the respondents feel that their data will not have any threat only when the organization monitors those acts which are inappropriate to the standards of the organization.
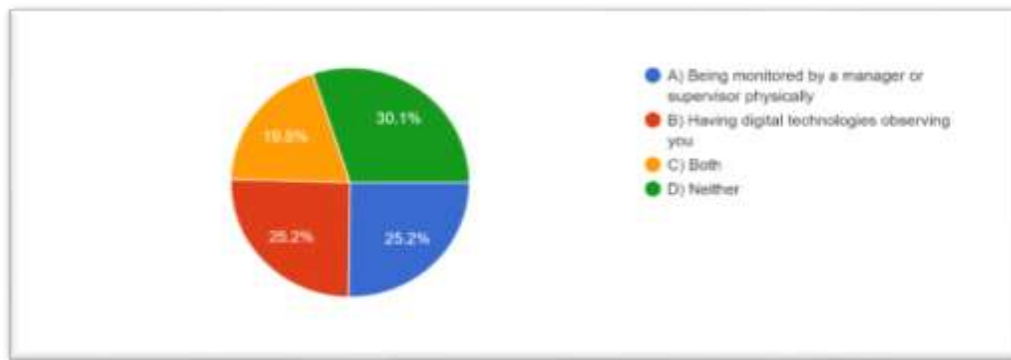
The above pie chart represents asking the employees to choose among the above options to find which mode of monitoring they feel to work under the employee monitoring working condition. in which 25.2% of the choose that they are comfortable in being monitored by both manger or supervisor physically and also by having monitored through technological. But in the real instance employees prefer to be monitored technology over physical.

Findings

The study finds that employees are aware of employee monitoring and the tools used by their organization. The majority of the employees find that employee monitoring is necessary to an extent, whereas few employees feel that their privacy might be invaded. Employees are aware of employee monitoring which is part of their company policies. They are not feeling comfortable with physical monitoring when compared to technology surveillance. Employees feel that an ethical way of monitoring by the employer has a positive impact on employees' productivity. Few employees feel highly stressed when they are being continuously monitored. Hence we find that trust is a key factor between employees and employers.

We also found that although most employees are understanding and supportive of monitoring, employers fail to take it seriously and explain to the employees how and why they are being monitored. Due to this lack of information & communication, employees may not necessarily understand the ethical or legal implications of monitoring.

Limitations of the study

1. The study could not be done conducted on a larger sample size due to a lack of access to employees.
2. Since technology and its usage is vast and differs from organization to organization, we were unable to account for the extent of technology use in the organization
3. Other than employees' perception, no other factors are taken into consideration such as actual productivity, the current pandemic scenario, and so on. While we have touched on these topics in our study, we have not studied them in detail.

Conclusion

The study finds that the employees on a whole are aware of employee monitoring and they are also aware that it is required for the company's safety and is a part of the company's policies. What is lacking though is employer's accountability for employee monitoring to take the time to explain to the employees how and why the surveillance is done. Simply assuming that employees understand the need for monitoring and assuming that all would be aware cannot justify a lack of explanation. As the study shows a small percentage of respondents were not informed about being monitored and they might have signed a consent form without really realizing the legal implications of that form. Thus, it is the duty of the employer to explain to employees and to protect their privacy. Employers need to clearly explain to employees that their activities are being monitored and that the resources of the business, especially the technological resources, monitor employee's activities. This is an ethical move on part of the employers. While employees support employee monitoring, most of them do not trust the safety of their data and the same is reflected in the literature review done in this study.

Thus, employee monitoring is widely accepted by both employer and employee as common but what is critically missing is the factor of trust and the role it plays in an organization. This is partly due to the employer's ignorance in communicating to the employee the measures taken to keep their private data secured and the instances in which it will be reviewed.

Overall, we conclude that employees agree that employee monitoring influences their productivity positively and find it beneficial for their work.

Lastly, we can conclude that while technology has made things very easy and provided more options for employee monitoring, it has certain ethical threats, the most common one being hacking of personal data from organizations. Employers thus need to protect and also explain to employees how the collected are protected and also that they will not misuse it.

Ultimately, it is very hard to find the balance of ethics in employee monitoring as the continuous changes in technology pose new challenges for employee monitoring. In the meanwhile, the employer should have some strong policies from where the data collected is not used unless there is a necessity to do so in order to protect the business or justify the employee's actions.

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