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Towards understanding fairness judgments associated with computer performance monitoring: An integration of the feedback, justice, and monitoring research

G. Stoney Alder[a,*], Maureen L. Ambrose[b,1]

[a]*Department of Management, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 456009, Las Vegas, NV 89154-6009, United States*
[b]*Management Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816, United States*

Abstract

We integrate and extend research and theory on organizational justice, performance feedback, and performance monitoring to develop a model of individuals' reactions to computer monitoring. The model proposes that the perceived interpersonal and procedural fairness of monitoring-related feedback are key to understanding individuals' attitudinal and performance reactions to monitoring. Based on the feedback, justice, and monitoring literatures, the model further suggests that feedback constructiveness, feedback source (whether monitored employees receive feedback from the computer monitoring system or from their supervisors), and control over the feedback are three key feedback dimensions expected to drive fairness judgments. Implications for management and research on feedback, justice, and computer monitoring are described.

Keywords: Monitoring; Justice; Performance feedback

1. Introduction

Organizations have always monitored their employees. Indeed the balance between autonomy and monitoring is the subject of entire literatures (e.g., agency theory). Recent changes in technology have

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: alders@unlv.nevada.edu (G.S. Alder).
[1] Tel.: +1 407 823 5684.

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provided organizations with an array of new options and methods for monitoring. However, with these options come challenges. Organizations must make decisions about the attributes of the monitoring system and how to configure these attributes for most effective implementation of this technology. In this manuscript, we draw on research from justice, feedback, and computer monitoring to address how attributes of computer performance monitoring feedback affect monitored employees' attitudes and performance.

Monitoring of employee performance went unquestioned and generated little discussion and attention for centuries. However, scrutiny of employee performance monitoring has dramatically increased as a growing number of organizations are turning to computer technology to improve the effectiveness of their monitoring efforts. Computer performance monitoring (CPM) is the use of computer hardware and software to collect, store, analyze, and report individual or group actions or performance (Nebeker & Tatum, 1993).[2] CPM differs from traditional supervisory monitoring (e.g., direct observation, cf. Stanton, 2000a, 2000b) in several respects. CPM may be constant, pervasive, and unblinking (Aiello, 1993). As a result, CPM can provide supervisors with voluminous data about multiple dimensions of performance including attendance, work speed, work completed and errors. CPM also introduces a number of decisions organizations must make concerning the procedures they utilize to provide workers with performance information. For example, with traditional monitoring, physical and cognitive limitations restrict the amount of monitoring-based feedback supervisors can give to employees. Supervisors simply cannot be at all places at all times. In contrast, the continuous nature of CPM greatly expands the amount and frequency of feedback that can be given to employees. CPM systems make possible the provision of continuous feedback to employees (Kluger & Adler, 1993). However, too much feedback may prove counterproductive. Thus, decisions must be made concerning how much feedback to provide monitored employees. Additionally, CPM may alter the content of feedback. Indeed, critics of CPM contend that CPM often leads to less specific and more intimidating, hostile feedback (Nussbaum & duRivage, 1986).

Finally, CPM technology necessitates that organizations make choices regarding the source and medium of feedback. Traditional monitoring involves the physical presence of a supervisor who may provide feedback, however informal, during the course of the monitoring. Thus, face-to-face feedback generally occurs in connection with traditional monitoring. In contrast, face-to-face feedback may be eliminated from the CPM-based feedback loop. Therefore, organizations must determine the extent to which they provide feedback to employees in face-to-face communication as opposed to computer-mediated communication. As Siegel, Dubrovsky, Keisler, and McGuire (1986) predicted, computer-mediated communication has become a mainstay of organizational communication and has major effects on work and the organization of work. This development also impacts the nature of feedback in organizations. Thus, Cusella (1987) observed that research on computer-generated feedback will take on added importance for the study of communication in organizations. However, with few exceptions (e.g., Earley, 1988; Kluger & Adler, 1993), Cusella's (1987) call for increased research on computer-generated feedback has gone unanswered.

[2] CPM is one monitoring technique within the larger domain of electronic monitoring (EM). In addition to CPM, electronic monitoring includes video surveillance, telephone monitoring, email monitoring, and Internet monitoring. Although similar in some respects, CPM differs from other forms of EM in that it compiles data that is focuses directly on the quantity and quality of employee performance. Although other forms of EM may provide some information that managers include when giving feedback to employees, they are not focused exclusively on performance. Indeed, gathering performance data is often peripheral to other objectives of EM such as security. As a result, CPM is more closely linked to the performance feedback processes and is the focus of this paper.