

Clarifying the effects of Internet monitoring on job attitudes: The mediating role of employee trust

G. Stoney Alder^{a,*}, Terry W. Noel^b, Maureen L. Ambrose^c

^a *Department of Management, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway,
Box 456009, Las Vegas, NV 89154-6009, United States*

^b *California State University, Chico, CA, United States*

^c *Management Department, University of Central Florida, FL, United States*

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Abstract

The Internet is a fast growing mechanism for providing workplace monitoring. We examined how its implementation affects employees' trust in the organization. We hypothesized that giving employees advance notice of monitoring and providing them a justification for it would enhance their trust. We investigated how employees' perceptions of organizational support prior to monitoring moderated these relationships by conducting a longitudinal field experiment. We found that advance notice and perceived organizational support exerted significant main and interactive effects on post-implementation trust. In turn, trust significantly affected employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions.

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In 2001, it was estimated that at least 63% of companies monitor their employees' Internet connections [8]. More recently, a survey of 840 US companies by the American Management Association showed that 60% now use some type of software to monitor their employees' incoming and outgoing e-mail, up from 47% in 2001. The growing popularity of Internet and e-mail monitoring is reflected in the exploding market for monitoring software. Forrester Research reported that the industry for monitoring software is growing at a rate of about 30% a year, now about US\$ 250–300 million [45].

Although the specifics of monitoring systems differ, Internet systems typically allow employers to track the

sites an employee accesses and control their access. Although some Internet control systems were originally designed to manage traffic on organizational networks, more recent systems focus on restricting employee access to objectionable sites (e.g., pornographic) or restricting access to a broader range of “time-wasting” non-work sites including gambling, games, and travel.

The increase in Internet monitoring has generated considerable debate [24]. Organizations that utilize monitoring cite the need to curtail employee Internet abuse. Although the Internet may potentially boost productivity by enhancing communications, collaboration, and research capabilities, it may also undermine efficiency if employees spend time surfing the web for personal ends. In addition, employee downloading songs and movie trailers can clog corporate networks. Cyberloafing (using Internet access for personal

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 702 895 2052;
fax: +1 702 895 4370.

E-mail address: alders@unlv.nevada.edu (G.S. Alder).

purposes during work hours) is a prevalent and pressing issue [27]. Over 60% of workers surf the web at least once a day for personal reasons, according to Cyber Protect [37]. And a Websense [48] survey found that employees admitted spending 1.5 h per week visiting non-work-related web sites in the office. In contrast, HR managers reported that workers spend 8.3 h accessing non-work web sites each week. Websense estimated that Internet misuse costs American corporations more than US\$ 85 billion annually in lost productivity.

More serious forms of Internet abuse may threaten organizations or expose them to legal liability. Only one employee accessing sexually explicit material can embroil a firm in an expensive lawsuit. A recent FBI survey revealed that 78% of companies found that some of their employees had abused their Internet privileges, such as by downloading pornography or software [26]. According to SexTracker, a service that monitors usage of pornographic web sites, 70% of the traffic on porn sites occurred during office hours [18]. ComScore Networks reported that 37% of Internet-enabled employees in US had visited an “X-rated” web site while at work. In sum, employers use Internet monitoring to discourage productivity loss, avoid legal liability, eliminate downloading of pirated software, protect intellectual property, and preserve bandwidth.

Although Internet monitoring may benefit organizations, it raises concerns about employee privacy and micro-management. Some employees feel degraded, stressed, and dehumanized by being closely monitored [9]. As a result, the decision to monitor employees’ Internet activity remains highly emotional and intensely controversial [50]. Many workers’ rights advocates are angered and offended by the trend toward increased Internet monitoring. Arguments voiced by opponents typically focus on several primary concerns about monitoring:

1. It is unfair and abusive.
2. It is like Big Brother, unnecessarily infringing employee rights.
3. It creates an atmosphere of mistrust.

As a result, critics contend that the implementation of electronic monitoring has a detrimental effect on employee morale, increases worker stress, and engenders negative job attitudes [25].

Despite the attention Internet monitoring has received, academic research is lacking [13]. In view of the prominent place trust often takes in discussions of Internet monitoring, we argue that this is an important gap in the literature. We therefore examined one type of

electronic monitoring: that of employee access to the Internet. Here, we present the results of a field experiment that measured the effect of advance notification, justification, and perceived organizational support on organizational trust following the implementation of Internet monitoring. We also examined the effect of post-monitoring trust on employees’ job attitudes.

1. Internet monitoring and organizational trust

Trust influences employee reactions and affects the success and effectiveness of human resource activities. Although research on organizational trust has traditionally focused on its effect on the success of organizational activities, human resource activities may also affect its development. Using exchange theory, Whitener [49] argued that trust was a consequence of the content and process of human resource activities and a mediator of the impact of HR practices on important outcomes.

The implementation of Internet monitoring may be a salient event that affects employee trust. Monitoring is mooted as creating an atmosphere of mistrust [32]. Strickland’s [44] classic research indicated that extensive surveillance and monitoring of employees may erode trust. Luhmann [30] adopted a control perspective to explain the relationship between monitoring and trust. He argued that monitoring and trust serve as alternative mechanisms of control. Mayer et al. [33] further suggested that a strong organizational control system may inhibit the development of trust.

Previous research found that low trust in terms of expected performance led to increased monitoring [6]. Piccoli and Ives [38] found that organizational monitoring negatively affected trust in virtual teams and that team members more closely monitored teammates that had proven unreliable. Employees may be naturally suspicious of organizations whose actions indicate that management does not trust them. As a result, the implementation of Internet monitoring may have a detrimental effect. However, electronic monitoring research indicates that employees’ behavioral and attitudinal reactions to monitoring depend on a number of factors including the manner in which the organization implements and utilizes the monitoring technology [7].

2. Model and hypotheses

Fig. 1 depicts our model relationships. We expected that perceived organizational support (POS) prior to implementation of monitoring, advance notice, and

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