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Information and Organization

Journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/infoandorg



A field study of corporate employee monitoring: Attitudes, absenteeism, and the moderating influences of procedural justice perceptions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 October 2008

Received in revised form 20 June 2009

Accepted 23 June 2009

Keywords:

Personnel monitoring

Procedural justice

Psychological contract

Organizational security policy

ABSTRACT

Managers are responsible for creating and enforcing company policies governing organizational practices, and one practice that is on the rise in organizations involves monitoring of employees for security purposes. The research literature on security behaviors has focused almost exclusively on compliance with or obedience to such policies; however, compliance with prescribed behaviors is not complete in terms of organizational performance. People may comply with policies with which they disagree, but harbor resentments and exhibit counterproductive and even destructive behaviors in protest. We conducted a field study of organizational monitoring policies and practices using factors from the threat control model and found that perceptions of threat, self-efficacy, and trust in the organization were key factors in attitudes about monitoring, and that these factors interacted with employee perceptions of organizational procedural justice such that high perceptions of organizational procedural justice moderated negative attitudes toward corporate monitoring, and better attitudes about monitoring was found to associate with reduced employee absences from the job.

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1. Introduction

Managers carry special responsibilities for stewardship over personnel and organizational resources through enforcement of company policies and practices. In the execution of their stewardship, they may be involved in the gathering of information about employees such as their performance

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doi:10.1016/j.infoandorg.2009.06.001

measurements compared to their objectives and other work-related activities; but also, increasingly, managers are called upon to gather information about employees and enforce organizational policies that include various security practices such as monitoring access to vital corporate resources (Thomas, 2004). Monitoring is the physical or electronic observation of someone's activities and behavior (Ball & Webster, 2003).

These practices are particularly acute in organizations that are regulated by government legislation, such as in the healthcare industry in the United States (US) through the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) or those that deliver products and services to a government agency or are regulated in the European Union (EU) or the United Kingdom (UK). Thus in most cases, organizations must gather information about employees to identify and authenticate them for access control, and then monitor their behavior as they conduct their work, which produces a large cache of employee-specific data (Mueller, 2007). Because of the severity of the consequences of security breaches, as well as levied as punitive measures by regulators for non-compliance, organizations are increasing their technological monitoring practices, but research into the organizational impacts from these practices is lagging behind (Workman, 2008a).

While a significant amount research has investigated issues related to company policy compliance, we contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we fill a gap in the literature by studying the effects of forced compliance, and second, while studies (e.g. D'Urso, 2006) have begun to assess the psychosocial impacts on people from monitoring, the findings are mixed – some studies (e.g. Johnston & Cheng, 2002; Wigan & Clarke, 2006) indicating deleterious effects, while others (e.g. Acquisti & Grossklags, 2005; Allen, Coopman, Hart, & Walker, 2007) often finding acceptance among workers for such practices. Our research helps to explain these contradictory findings. Finally, we addressed whether organizational procedural justice practices might offset some of the negative effects such as absenteeism.

1.1. Monitoring: the unblinking eye

The unblinking eye (Castells, Mireia-Fernandez, Qiu, & Sey, 2006) is a reference to the constant monitoring of physical or electronic movements and activities of people. In most cases people are aware of company monitoring activities in the US, EU, and the UK. However; this is not always the case as was exposed about the covert monitoring of employees at Deutsche Bahn and Deutsche Telekom and other companies (c.f. DW Worldwide, 2009). Post the “US-9/11 attacks” as it is known, there are new legal protections for corporate monitoring in the US, UK, and EU (Keck, 2005; Mueller, 2007), and the practices have continued to expand in both range and depth (D'Urso, 2006; Workman, 2008a).

In an organizational setting, it has become common practice for instance to allow the electronic observation of web surfing activity, monitoring emails, and telephone call monitoring of office employees (e.g. “for quality assurance purposes”), along with increasing use of global positioning satellite systems (GPS) and radio frequency identification (RFID) for tracking mobile workers (Aiello, 1993; Workman, 2008b).

Evidence of this escalation was shown by Vasterman, Yzermans, and Dirkzwager (2005) that indicated in 1999, 67% of employers electronically monitored their employees, but by 2001 that number had grown to 78%, and that 92% of employers indicated the use of electronic monitoring by 2003. Most of the employers surveyed (Harvey, 2007) said they monitored employee web surfing, more than half reviewed email messages and examined employees' computer files, and roughly one-third tracked content, keystrokes, and time spent at the computer. In addition, employers are increasingly adding video monitoring to their monitoring repertoire (Fairweather, 1999). Of companies surveyed (Harvey, 2007), only 18% of the companies used video monitoring in 2001, but by 2005, that number had climbed to 51%, and 10% of the respondents indicated that cameras were installed specifically to track job performance.

1.2. Monitoring: attitudes and organizational behavior

The growing pervasiveness of the information collections has combined with increasing technological sophistication, allowing companies to monitor the actions of employees more invasively also (Akdeniz, Walker, & Wall, 2000; Fairweather, 1999). Software that covertly monitors computer

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