Employee Monitoring Vs. Workplace Trust In An Age Of Remote Working

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 17 December 2020

This year, as communities came together to fight Covid-19, millions of employees packed up their desks and headed for their study, kitchen, or shed. Technology responded, supporting teams to find new ways to collaborate through digital channels. But this connected virtual workplace brought friction too.

As the months rolled on, leaders started to worry that they didn't know if staff were productive at home, and more organizations began to look at technology to monitor their employees. Are organizations now in danger of inadvertently taking technology too far and engendering a culture of conflict and mistrust? Leaders need to carefully weigh up the impact of employee monitoring software and take a collaborative approach to implementation with their staff.

Big Brother's growing
Work-monitoring technology and workplace surveillance tools are not new, but they are becoming increasingly common with the global shift to remote working. Last month, Microsoft launched its Productivity Score, which can monitor time spent in virtual meetings and the number of emails sent. Amazon's new Panorama tool uses existing security cameras to monitor staff movement and is being trialed by companies such as Siemens and Deloitte.

Assessing the impact
Arguably, a certain level of monitoring can support organizations to become more productive and improve business processes. For example, if certain activities are taking too long, work can be outsourced to create business efficiencies and enable employees to focus on business-generation. Productivity tracking technology also provides employees with an opportunity to demonstrate their hard work and ability to work autonomously.

The controversy relating to these technologies arises when monitoring moves away from the macro-level to tracking individual metrics. Firstly, it promotes task-focus, not people-focus. In a virtual team, it is easy for interaction to be focused on tasks, and conflict often flares up when people feel micromanaged.

Monitoring also doesn't account for differences between individuals. People have different communication styles, preferred ways of working, and alternative approaches to getting a job done. This diversity is generally recognized as being healthy in teams. Requiring

everyone to spend a pre-defined amount of time on video calls or send a certain number of emails to be considered productive can crush creativity and stifle genuine collaboration.

Creating a culture of trust
A big consideration in all this is the message it sends about trust. When trust is built up between colleagues, smaller disagreements are more easily overlooked or dealt with, as there is mutual understanding and respect of each other's' intentions. According to the leadership expert Dov Seidman, "trust is the only legal performance-enhancing drug. Whenever there is more trust in a company, country or community, good things happen". Engaged, productive workers trust in leaders, believe they share the same values, and are invested in working towards common goals. An organization that implements excessive work monitoring risks breaking that contract of trust, leading to the opposite effect – a disengaged workforce, focused on meeting the desired statistics rather than doing their best and supporting each other.

Concerns are already being raised over the effect of monitoring and AI on well-being. The first stage of an AI project by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) warned of people's experience of work becoming "increasingly robotic, alienating, monotonous, lonely".

A transparent, collaborative approach
If leaders decide to go ahead with work monitoring, potential conflict can be mitigated by working collaboratively and with openness. Early engagement with staff and unions in the need for such technology, as well as involvement in scoping and development, can help bring people along the journey of acceptance.

Transparent communication and education are key in any technology adoption, especially productivity monitoring. Organizations should be clear on how data is generated and how it will and will not be used. Leaders should also ensure that employees have the means to voice concerns or raise issues if they believe data is being misused, for example, if it is used to pressurize or bully staff into unrealistic targets.

2020 has given organizations the opportunity to transform the way they work. Many workers are enjoying the freedom that flexible working models bring, and some are more productive than ever. As 2021 approaches, leaders should be asking if work monitoring will cause distrust and demotivation at a time when organizations need their people to be connected and engaged.