Employee monitoring and workplace trust – a fine balance

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 25 May 2021

Our new connected and virtual workplaces come with added friction as employers try to balance trust with productivity. How far is too far when it comes to monitoring employee efficiency before you engender a culture of mistrust and conflict?

The use of software to monitor staff productivity is growing. Fuelled by the Covid-driven shift to remote working, the increase in tracking technology is a reflection of leaders' desire to ensure that 'out-of-sight' staff are working efficiently. However, it has implications, particularly on employee trust. Leaders need to carefully consider the impact monitoring has on the contract of trust and take a collaborative approach to avoid disengagement and conflict in the workforce.

Rise of the machines

The global employee remote monitoring technology market is booming, forecast to reach $1,396.2m by 2027. Recent research by Kaspersky, the global cybersecurity firm, found that 44% of home workers are now being monitored. Closer to home, the picture is similar. In a study of UK corporate decision-makers, conducted by Skillcast and YouGov, 20% said that their organisations had implemented, or were planning to implement, online software to monitor remotely working employees.

Monitoring comes in many forms, from how many emails a worker sends or how long they spend on Zoom, to productivity scoring and location tracking. Many tools make data available just to leaders or managers, whilst others also interact with workers. For example, some software can download videos of screens while staff work, or use a device's webcam to take a picture of the employee, and can also prompt them when they have been inactive for a period of time.

As the use of monitoring technology and AI increases, so do concerns about the impact on workers. In April, the EU proposed new rules and actions on the use of AI to protect the safety and rights of people and businesses. It identified AI used "for task allocation, monitoring or evaluation of persons in work-related contractual relationships" to be classified as high-risk, as those systems "may appreciably impact future career prospects and livelihoods of these persons".

Task-Oriented vs, People-Oriented

Whilst monitoring software can enable leaders to get a business-wide picture of system use, problems tend to arise when the focus shifts to individuals. Managing staff using productivity data tends to lead to an over-focus on tasks rather than people. No one likes to feel micromanaged and this is a common cause of tension and conflict. The temptation with data can be to encourage staff to reach similar 'approved' standards without recognising that people are individuals with different work styles. Telling someone they are spending too much time on video meetings, when their working style is naturally verbal, can decrease productivity and lead to conflict. Diversity in

approach, communication style and even speed of work is healthy in teams, fostering discussion, creativity and collaboration.

The Kaspersky research also identified that monitoring can have other counter-productive effects on employee behaviour. Almost a quarter (24%) of those with company-provided devices that had monitoring software installed, were using personal technology to get around monitoring software, and 46% being monitored revealed that they stayed logged into systems longer than they needed to be while working remotely. These unhealthy behaviours – 'playing the system' – weaken relationships between employees and employers and are likely to impact both productivity and engagement.

The contract of trust

For organisations, one of the most important implications of adopting monitoring tools is its impact on trust. Trust is one of the foundations of engagement and performance. Workers who trust their manager and organisation, who believe they are working towards the same goals and values, are more likely to be engaged and productive. This contract of trust can be broken if the employer implements excessive monitoring, which in turn can affect interpersonal relationships, particularly how people deal with potential disputes. When trust has been established between co-workers, misunderstandings or minor disagreements are often overlooked or dealt with informally.

Openness and consultation

There are many reasons why organisations decide to implement some form of tracking or monitoring. A transparent and collaborative approach, from the start, can help to reduce the risk of conflict. The TUC recommends ensuring worker consultation on the development, introduction and operation of new technologies. By being open about the need for monitoring, helping staff understand the technical aspects and giving them a voice in the process, they are more likely to accept its use. Organisations should also be clear and transparent about how the resulting data will be used, and ensure leaders and manager are fully trained. There need to be clear processes in place for staff to raise issues if they perceive data misuse.

As the move towards remote and flexible working is likely to continue for many organisations after the pandemic, leaders need to weigh up the type and scale of monitoring, and if indeed it is necessary at all. For many organisations, focussing on people rather than tasks will strengthen relationships, build engagement and avoid unnecessary and destructive conflict.