

Eyeing the Employee: Workplace Surveillance and the Productivity Incentive

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Region: [USA](#)

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How can I monitor what I need to monitor while still providing enough of a backstage for the ones who need it, enabling the alliances we want? John Neiditz, Big Data Tech Law, Jul 12, 2014

A post by John Neiditz in Big Data Tech Law (Jul 12)[1] makes use of a pertinent concept to relations in the workplace. He draws on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who suggests that individuals need a “backstage” to ready themselves for interaction with each other. The point about the latter hinges on performance, something of a theatrical display between thespians; the point on the former is inspired preparation, something that takes place privately, away from prying eyes, however judgmental they might be.

As Neiditz explains, “In some ways, what we have done by not (in the US) extending employee privacy rights from the private physical spaces (eg. lockers) to the employer-sponsored electronic media on which many employees live is to get rid of the backstage, and social media intensifies the self-expression.” The less anthropologically minded might resort to plain legal terms: to what extent does workplace surveillance intrude, violate, and remove privacy?

The organisational language about the US workplace and performance is astonishingly Stakhanovite in its manner. The tone is heavy with performance credentials, units, “outputs” and that ridiculous notion of “feedback”, giving the impression that the worker is merely a computer processor keen to process, happy to be programmed. Such a treatment, by its manner, has no room for private realms and creative “backstages” other than as pragmatic imports. You only care about a backstage if it has utility; you ignore it if the workers in question can work effectively with dozens of other working ants in the same, refrigerated room.

This is not the human value but the product value that matters. A deeper understanding of such behaviour is likely to send us all to the British Library to become Marxists and contemplate the alienation of the individual with respect to labour. Battalions of consultants, dark suited human resource managers, and work plan fetishists have been busy eliminating the human in the equation while always talking about it.

In the workplace, there is every sense that the employee is treated as moveable and malleable commodity. Another aspect of the same problem is whether such workers can be socialised into an appropriate regime. Through new technological means, writes the *New York Times* (Jun 21), “companies have found, for example, that workers are more productive if they have more social interaction.” Examples include the introduction of a shared 15-

minute coffee break by a bank's call centre. More socialising leads to greater sales. Bravo!

Records of emails are stored. Conduct is monitored with needling obsessiveness. Behaviour can be filmed, recorded, and retained. There is also a sense in legislation that supposedly regulates such environments that workers need monitoring. A legal outline by the Australian lawyer firm Gilbert & Tobin[2] speaks of "a significant benefit to employers" in the area of monitoring emails. One of these is noting, and intervening, in cases of harassment, where the playground supervisor separates and punishes the children. Another is that of standard criminal impropriety.

The cunning nature of such highly tuned surveillance is that it is turned on its head to make employees like it, or at the very least, endure it. Jim Sullivan[3], manager of a Dallas restaurant, is a firm advocate of digital monitoring. He wasn't "stupid", knowing it was there. He simply learned to love it. Such techniques noted his productivity, and padded out the resume for promotion. "When people know they are being watched, I believe that productivity improves" (*New York Times*, Jun 21).

Companies like Sociometric Solutions focus on what are termed "sensor-rich ID badges" that have microphones, location sensors, and accelerometers. Sociometric Solutions' Ben Waber is keen to suggest that he is on the side of the angels – well, the workers – noting that privacy is important, provided that the worker is given a choice about data collection. The omission here is that workers who choose to opt out of the arrangement are bound to find themselves left behind in the vicious rat race. Career suffers for the privacy vultures, even if, as some researchers[4] note, privacy might actually be more productive than open slather monitoring.

Such a vision, and rapidly emerging reality, resembles less the Orwellian notion of police state surveillance imposed by ruthless management and cruel repression. It resides more in the area of benign seduction akin to the *Brave New World*, one where pleasure is used as weapon and incentive.

When it comes to monitoring employees in the private sphere, Huxley's pneumatic chair takes first place, a suggestion that people want that world, or at the very least, are persuaded to. Controller Mustapha Mond has that exalted role. Operations can be "undergone voluntarily for the good of Society, not to mention the fact that it carries a bonus amounting to six months' salary." The world is accordingly divided into "frightfully clever" Alphas, middle-of-the-road Betas and stupid Gammas – and the list goes on. The world is your oyster, as long as you get into it.

Huxley is the animating spirit behind Waber's policies. He, and his employees, encourage pharmaceutical companies to readjust their social spaces and get in the furniture specialists. The data gathered is thrilling, not merely for the number addicts – a café area, for instance, where workers congregate at large tables – is suggested. Small tables involve fewer minds, and enthusiasts. Bigger tables, well, entails more minds, more chatter, and more dosh.

Every adduced ground is bound to have some merit if it is emphasised with robotic repetitiveness. There is always some "good" plastered across a catchy slogan or a justifying brief. The principle that still sustains a battering here is that of private domains, and where standard relationships can be formed between employee and employer.

One thing is clear in this: the purses of consultants are being lined with gold, suggesting how that balance is struck. And their work remits usually open with the same dead wording: the employer's expectation of sound performance and the employee's right "that every sneeze or trip to the water cooler isn't being recorded." [5] Hardly matters, if you are Jim Sullivan.

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Notes

[1]

<http://blognetwork.kilpatricktownsend.com/bigdatatechlawblog/2014/07/12/the-presentation-of-the-self-in-the-everyday-workplace/>

[2] <http://www.gtlaw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Employer-surveillance.pdf>

[3]

http://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/bits/2014/06/21/workplace-surveillance-and-the-transparency-paradox/?_php=true,true&_type=blogs,blogs&_r=1&utm_content=buffer8328c&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

[4]

http://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/bits/2014/06/21/workplace-surveillance-and-the-transparency-paradox/?_php=true,true&_type=blogs,blogs&_r=1&utm_content=buffer8328c&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

[5]

<http://www.symmetryconsult.com/article?id=96&article=Monitoring,-Surveillance,-and-Privacy-in-the-Workplace>

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