Chapter 5
Information Privacy Concerns and Workplace Surveillance:
A Case of Differing Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Consumers' privacy concerns have escalated in parallel with our increasing dependence on technology and its pervasiveness into social and work environments. Many of these concerns emanate from the paradox that is the willingness of consumers to provide personal information in order to achieve a specific outcome, whilst equally harbouring the contradictory desire for such personal information to be treated as private. Although examinations of information privacy have tended to focus on the transaction environment, the computer-mediated work environment has emerged as a new and significant area of concern due to increased awareness of the ways in which technologies are now being used to monitor employee email, Internet interactions, and work productivity. Such surveillance concerns are likely to negatively impact employee morale and consequent productivity. However, little attention has been paid to this issue to date. This chapter examines a number of emerging issues concerning technology-enabled workplace surveillance and considers whether the privacy concerns of employees can be successfully balanced against managements' justification for the employment of such technologies in the workplace. In doing so, it provides a balanced perspective that will be of assistance to academics and practitioners alike in dealing with this emerging and contentious issue.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that privacy has been studied across a wide range of disciplines, it has been described as a concept that is 'in disarray' (Solove 2006: 477) due to the fact that there is no consensus regarding how it should be defined or conceptualized (Margulis 2003). One consequence of this is that our understanding of privacy concerns remains fragmented as, being defined by the field and focus of each researcher, the concepts that are examined and the ways in which they are validated remain inconsistent and therefore are of limited generalizability. As Solove (2006: 479) notes, 'privacy seems to be about everything and therefore is about nothing'.

Undoubtedly, information privacy (as opposed to physical privacy) is a multidimensional concept (Xu et al., 2011) and many overlapping concepts such as secrecy and anonymity have been linked to it, consequently adding to the confusion that surrounds the construct. However, progress is being made in this regard. For example, whilst some information systems studies have equated information privacy with control, more recent work (Dinev & Hart 2006) has shown that while control influences privacy concerns, it does not in itself equate to privacy. Thus, Dinev et al., (2013) assert that there is a need to integrate the different perspectives acquired from different fields in order to build a more rigorous, empirically testable framework of privacy and its closely associated correlates, which have often been confused with or built into definitions of privacy.

The imperative for greater clarity stems from the fact that information privacy is an issue of increasing concern to many stakeholders, including consumers, employers, privacy activists, researchers and policy makers. To a great extent, these concerns relate directly to the exponential growth of Internet-based technologies. Whilst the benefits bestowed by such technologies is undisputed, it is an undeniable fact that they have generated considerable concern regarding the way in which they can be used to collate and use information on individuals without their prior permission. For example, the recent surge of pervasive technologies into the workplace environment has generated privacy concerns amongst employees. The pervasive computing environment is characterised by the seamless integration of technologies into society, and it is this transparent nature that has fuelled many of these privacy concerns with employees becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which management can employ such technologies to monitor their email and computer interactions in the workplace. However, as profit-driven organisations aim to manage their business in an efficient and productive manner, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect that such organisations would not avail of the obvious empowering benefits that these communication-monitoring technologies afford them. Furthermore, it can be argued that they may in fact have legitimate reasons to monitor employee actions in the first place.

A number of questions surround the issue of workplace surveillance in particular those relating to the ethical nature of managements' ability to monitor employees' computer interactions. The aim of this paper therefore is to outline some of the major issues relating to workplace surveillance, to identify the emerging issues and subsequent privacy concerns from the employee's perspective, as well as the motivation behind managements' decision to employ monitoring technologies in the workplace. As such, this paper explores the ethical impact of monitoring in the computer-mediated work environment, addressing whether management's ability to monitor employee actions in workplace represents good business practice or constitutes an invasion of privacy.