Chapter XI
The Cultural Factors in Electronic Monitoring

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ABSTRACT

The use of electronic monitoring tools in the workplace has grown dramatically because of the availability of inexpensive but powerful monitoring systems and the wide use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in today's workplace. However, existing research pays little attention to the pervasive use of electronic monitoring systems on ICT at work. This chapter draws theories in international and organizational cultures and concludes four hypotheses on privacy concerns of employees and their perceived trust to the management when being electronically monitored.

INTRODUCTION

It is an inevitable trend today that businesses are reaching and interacting with international customers via the Internet. Thus, the issue on the privacy concerns of Internet consumers has been repeatedly discussed and widely researched (Hoffman & Novak, 1999; Milberg, Burke, Smith, & Kallman, 1995; Nord, McCubbins, & Nord, 2006; Wen & Gershuny, 2005). Nord, et al. (2006) examine the employer-employee workplace privacy relationship and identify the existing federal and state laws governing workplace privacy. Milberg et al. (1995) investigated the relationships among personal information privacy concerns, nationalities, cultural values, and information privacy regulations, and found that cultural differences play an important role on personal information privacy concerns. However, less attention has been paid on the company employees' privacy concerns while corporations are turning global, setting up foreign branches, and recruiting overseas employees. Moreover, the impact of the widely installed surveillance tools that monitor

employees' computers and Internet connections has, yet been investigated further. Previous studies on the impact of these surveillance tools were focused on trust and privacy (Agre, 1994; Nord et al., 2006; Tabak & Smith, 2005; Westin, 1992) without considering employees' cultural differences. This chapter aims to discuss the relationship between employees' cultural differences and their privacy concerns under the electronic surveillance working environment.

TREND IN THE USE OF ELECTRONIC MONITORING

In this information era, employees use computers at work more often than before. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce's survey (2002), the number of employees 25 or older who used computers at work increased from 52% in 1998 to 57% in 2001. Nevertheless, the percentage of those who used the Internet and/or e-mail at work soared 22% from 1998 to 2001. An important finding of this survey is that many employees admitted that they went online at work for personal business. The employers, on the other hand, were worried about their employees being distracted from work, along with such issues as security concerns due to easy desktop Internet access (Noack, 1999; Urbaczewski & Jessup, 2002).

Not surprisingly, more and more organizations are monitoring their employees at the workplace. Simply observe the historical trend from 1997 to 2005 (AMA, 2001, 2005). In 1997, there were 35% of major American corporations that recorded and reviewed employees' communications and activities on the job. This figure climbed to almost 81% in 2001. There are many different types of surveillance tools that companies use such as monitoring telephone, e-mail, computer, video camera, and Internet connections. E-mail monitoring was the type of surveillance with the sharpest increase in use from 1997 to 1999. From 2000 to 2005, the use of Internet connection monitoring increased from 54% to 76%. By observing the employees who were fired in 2005, it was found that 26% of them lost their jobs for misusing the Internet while 25% misused e-mail.

Schulman (2001) confirms that monitoring employees has become a worldwide trend. According to his research, 35% of employees in America and 27% of employees worldwide were monitored by monitoring software installed by their employers. In the U.S., a possible reason for the prevalent use of electronic monitoring at work is that ECPA 1986, the only frequently cited law in workplace privacy suits, gives little protection to employees in the workplace, especially when they use company-owned equipment. After the September 11 attack, the Patriot Act (or the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001) has given the federal government more authority and power to monitor electronic communications such as e-mails and Internet activities.

As the focus of corporate monitoring is switching from telephone and video monitoring to e-mail and computer-based monitoring, employees being monitored are expanding from blue- to white-collar workers. More and more white-collar workers, such as managers, professionals and even university faculty, are being monitored (Allen, 1993).

There are many types of monitoring software or surveillance tools that can record keystrokes and browsed websites. For monitoring e-mail, special software is able to filter out e-mails which include words such as porn, sex, boss and others. To an extreme, employers can even track where their employees are via GPS technology using their cell phones. The management of electronic monitoring technology has become a critical issue.

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