

WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID

DATA & SOCIETY

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NEW CAUTIONS FOR HR MANAGERS ON WORKER SURVEILLANCE

As offices remain closed to contain the spread of COVID-19, many organizations are allowing their workers to work from home indefinitely. Remote monitoring and tracking tools are becoming popular methods for assessing employees' performance levels as companies shift to remote work.

However, HR professionals and managers should know about these technologies' negative effects. While intended to keep workers on task, these tools open a window into employees' homes and private lives, and may collect irrelevant data, providing employers with an incomplete picture of workers' productivity.



What are the tools?

- **Connectivity.** Tools that require workers to leave their laptop cameras and microphones on throughout the workday provide a constant window into workers' lives. Some communication software has facial and affect recognition capabilities, which try to track workers' concentration and mood.
- **Remote monitoring, and time and location tracking.** These tools are used to optimize worker productivity by collecting minute pieces of data, such as millisecond differences in typing speed, duration of calls, and tone of voice.
- **Predicting and flagging.** These programs record computer activities such as browsing history, file downloads, and email exchanges in order to capture abnormal activity. Some take snapshots of screens periodically, capturing open applications and files, emails, and video calls.
- **Biometric and health data tracking.** This includes frequent temperature checks but also includes wearable fitness tracking apps that continually monitor employees' health statistics.

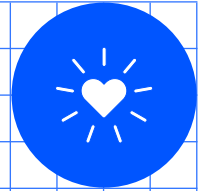


What are the risks?

- **Incomplete data.** Only what can be measured can be monitored. Surveillance tech cannot track important activities like ideation, evaluating one's progress, or making work-related phone calls. Even biometric data doesn't neatly align with a person's health status; for example, temperature checks don't always predict a COVID infection.
- **Gamification.** Data can be used to create competitions among workers. Scores created by monitoring tools can encourage behavior meant to optimize these metrics, which might not align with quality of work.
- **Hands-off supervision.** Work can become governed by score-based goal setting and digital dashboards rather than direct feedback and supervision. Paradoxically, this can make more work for managers.
- **Violating privacy.** Constant communication tools invite managers into employees' homes. Health tracking, too, allows access to workers' personal information. Crossing these boundaries raises questions about worker consent and legal protections.
- **Lack of trust.** An abundance of new monitoring, and an over-reliance on these tools, can come across to employees as a sudden loss of trust, straining employee relations and raising employee stress levels.
- **Unfair treatment.** In the wake of the pandemic, many working families are without childcare. Expecting normal levels of productivity ignores these conditions and unfairly penalizes large swaths of the workforce, particularly women.

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What can managers do?

The best course of action is to not surveil employees. The reality is that many companies have already begun using these tools. HR managers should bear the following points in mind:

- **Involve employees.** Workers should be part of discussions about implementing new monitoring tools. Ongoing review processes should solicit employee input.
- **Formulate a policy.** Establishing clear principles and objectives can minimize risks, prevent arbitrary use of such tools, and achieve company goals while protecting employees.
- **Understand that perfect performance isn't possible.** Given the unusual and difficult circumstances we are all working in, managers should bear in mind that typical levels of performance will be difficult to achieve.
- **Don't rely solely on surveillance data.** Make sure that the data collected accurately reflects employees' performance. Contextualize this data with a more holistic assessment of workers' contributions.
- **Address bias.** Regularly audit the new level of monitoring, and implement a clear and confidential process for reporting instances of bias.

For more information, citations, and links to further reading please see: Nguyen, Aih. 2020. "On the Clock and at Home: Post-COVID-19 Employee Monitoring in the Workplace." People + Strategy Journal (Summer).

<https://www.hrps.org/resources/people-strategy-journal/summer2020/Pages/feature-nguyen.aspx/>