Productivity versus privacy – walking the employee tracking tight rope

As the remote working shift sees more businesses pivot to surveillance, what does it mean for privacy, and do companies run the risk of taking it too far? Here, Natalie Cramp, CEO of Profusion explores how to strike the right balance between technology and trust.

With the transition to widespread remote working having happened so rapidly, it has left some employers wondering how much work is actually going on. After all, it may look like an employee is logged on but without the opportunities afforded by the physical office environment the reality is that they could all too well be watching Netflix or at the gym.

In many cases, the resulting fear of productivity losses and declining revenues has encouraged leaders to ramp up their monitoring efforts. In fact, it's now estimated that 60 percent of employees report being subject to some form of technological surveillance and monitoring at their current or most recent job. And there is no shortage of employee monitoring software and tools to help with the job.

Multiple applications such as StaffCop, CleverControl and Time Doctor can track an employee's computer keystrokes, take screenshots and record screens,

sometimes even without their knowledge. Depending on the organisation's settings, Hubstaff can even take 1-3 screenshots every 10 minutes, while Teramin captures all keyboard activity and records "all information to comprehensive logs [that] can be used to formulate a base of user-based behaviour analytics."

More controversial solutions include Microsoft's 'productivity score', allowing managers to see which 365 products employees are using and for how long. This sits alongside the developing facial recognition category, enabling firms to monitor employees and ensure they are at their desks when they are supposed to be. So, the question begs – how do employees looking to get a tighter tech-based tab on employees strike the balance between productivity and privacy?

Start with why

As with all data exchanges, there needs to be thought put into why this equipment is necessary, the benefits for both sides and if this is the right method. Whilst there can be benefits, in most business environments very little can replace creating a high trust culture and having strong and consistent line management. In industries for example where time sheeting already exists, these offer a view of where employees spend their time, when they are working too many hours for their wellbeing, and when perhaps someone is needing guidance as things are taking longer than you would expect. Certainly in these environments I think you need to question whether there is a strong enough business case on either side to merit adding surveillance technology into the mix. If you do believe there is a business case to proceed, then there are some things to think about.

Beyond compliance

Technology always moves faster than the law. Added to this, of course, with the pandemic having fast-tracked remote working at lightning speed, it has left even less time than usual to draw up data protection legislation that specifically addresses the issue of employee surveillance.

Currently, under the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), employers are able to process employee data if they can justify its importance is greater than that of the interests of workers. While not the most concrete of frameworks, get it wrong and employees shown to be exploiting employee privacy could face excessive fines, not to mention grave reputational damage.

Further but equally limited guidance comes in the Employment Practices Code, with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) currently reviewing a more apt point of reference amid the radical working shift.

For the time being though, the onus remains very much on businesses to look beyond compliance and ensure they go the extra mile to ensure any monitoring investment is applied and used ethically.

Privacy versus productivity

The good news is that, as monitoring becomes the 'new normal' for remote workers, employees are becoming more comfortable with it – but only if used in the right way. This is seen in a recent study we conducted at Profusion which revealed two thirds of employees are comfortable with their employer monitoring them – if they can see the data. Most believed it would help to level the playing field by letting data play a critical objective role.

Here, it's about being transparent and fair. If choosing to go down the surveillance route, businesses should be open with their workforce from the offset, explaining how they came about the decision, what data will be collected and how it will be used. Involving employees in this way will build a foundation of trust from the start, help employees feel much more comfortable and understand benefits to them and their employer. As with all sharing of data, it needs to be a value exchange. In addition, this ensures employees can truly give proper consent, as they can only do that if they fully understand what is being asked.

Done correctly, what's positive is that this technology can actually bring many positive employee benefits. In many cases it can spur employees to work harder and more efficiently in the knowledge that their efforts will be duly recognised. In this way too, it can make it easier to stay on top of performance targets and reward staff on proven progress. It can also go a long way in helping managers identify and address worrying trends such as regular overworking in order to promote health and wellbeing.

Lastly, employers must ensure employees are able to easily disconnect from all associated monitoring equipment when off the clock. This is especially important amid the impending employee bill to give workers the right to disconnect all work equipment and properly switch off outside of working hours.

The impulse to monitor is understandable, especially in these times. But there is a fine line between ensuring productivity gains and encroaching on employee privacy, one which must be carefully navigated through a transparent, open approach that goes beyond compliance. Those who go the extra mile in this way will ensure a happier and more productive workforce – on and off the screen.

Natalie Cramp is CEO of _Profusion_.

Article by NATALIE CRAMP