

Big Brother's Watching: Workplace Surveillance Is Violating Employees' Trust

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It may be easy to always want to know what your employees are up to at work, but if employers want to build a loyal workforce, they may need to work on staying in the dark.

Three in four bosses are surveilling their staff, according to a recent study by VPN service provider ExpressVPN. Ninety percent actively track time spent by employees doing work versus other activities unrelated to work, and 46% say they've terminated an employee based on information collected related to their remote work.

But that model of work isn't sustainable, says Jeff Smith, vice president of people at performance management company 15Five. And it won't benefit either party.

"Micromanagement often happens because people are not properly educated, coached and enabled on how to be managers," he says. "They're not actually managing people appropriately or giving people more autonomy and freedom to accomplish the things that an organization needs them to accomplish."

Surveillance tactics include screen monitoring, periodic screen capture, enforced time logs as well as storing recordings of staff's calls, emails or messages, according to ExpressVPN. And while it may accomplish getting a picture of how an employee spends their time, it's hurting more than it's helping. One in six employees weren't aware it was possible for employers to monitor their communication and/or online activities, and 59% of employees who do know are stressed about having their online activity monitored.

"Employees feel like they need to be available," Smith says. "And feel like if they're not they'll get trouble. Which is when they end up in situations where they're downloading programs that make them appear active instead of just living their life. And then what does that do? It starts to breed mistrust between the employee, the manager and the organization."

Fifty-nine percent of employees say it's a violation of their trust to have their actions watched, 28% say it makes them feel unappreciated and 26% say it makes them feel resentment, according to the report. That can all lead to employees actively doing non-work activities during office hours, or even researching hacks on how to fake activity, like a mouse jigglers.

Most managers, Smith says, don't want to closely track their workforce. But they don't have the right safeguards in place to stay in the know without crossing personal boundaries. In a largely remote workforce, those boundaries are even trickier to manage, and Smith encourages employers to rethink their approach and perspective.

There are three practices Smith finds critical to being a good people manager. First, set goals with the individual and delineate what exactly a manager needs from them and set the standard for quality. Second, hold one-on-one check-ins where managers can recognize an employee's progress and be there for their employees emotionally. And third, create an environment where employees can safely give and receive feedback.

"Things like one-on-ones, asynchronous check-ins, making sure people have the right prioritized goals, knowing how to give and receive feedback, and having regular meaningful conversations with them — it's not something that most employers did," Smith says. "People want to make meaningful progress on meaningful work and they want to be seen as valuable for that progress."