

Summary

Introduction

Computer technology makes possible the continuous collection and analysis of management information about work performance and equipment use. This information can be useful to managers in managing resources, planning workloads, and reducing costs. It can be advantageous to employees as well, by providing timely feedback on performance and an objective basis for evaluation. Despite these possible advantages, however, there is controversy about computer-based monitoring on grounds that it invades employees' privacy, causes stress, and can be used unfairly by some employers.

Tools for Supervising Office Activities

"Computer-based monitoring" or "electronic monitoring" systems automatically record statistics about the work of employees using computer or telecommunication equipment in their jobs. Such statistics might include number of keystrokes made, types of transactions completed, or time spent for each transaction, for example.

"Service observation" refers to the practice of listening in on an employee's conversation with a customer to check on courtesy, correctness of information, or other factors. Service observation is not automatic; it requires a human supervisor. However, it is often used in conjunction with computer-based systems that collect information about the duration of the telephone call or the types of transactions the employee performs during the call. New technology has made service observation completely silent, so neither the employee nor the customer may know a supervisor is on the line.

"Telephone call accounting" refers to automatic, computer-generated records of the time, duration, and destination of telephone calls. It is generally used to manage telephone costs rather than to supervise the work process. Some employers use telephone call accounting to help reduce their employees' personal use of office telephones.

Computer-Based Work Monitoring

Computer work monitoring is affecting a small but growing segment of the office work force. It is estimated that around 6 million office workers have part or all of their work evaluation based on computer-generated statistics; for many others, such statistics may be collected but are not currently used for evaluation. The number of monitored workers can be expected to grow as computers begin to be used in more office jobs. In addition, computer work monitoring is also affecting people in non-office jobs, for example retail sales, as computers are introduced in a greater variety of workplaces.

Privacy.—Although many workers have expressed a feeling of privacy invasion when they are "constantly watched" by a machine, computer-based monitoring usually does not raise issues of privacy infringement in the strict legal sense. The workplace activities that are monitored by computer are primarily inherently public activities, many of which were subject to counting or supervision in other ways before computers became available. Privacy and access questions may arise, however, related to employees' ability to see or challenge records concerning their work.

Fairness.—The central workplace issues raised by monitoring are labor relations questions of fairness, dignity, autonomy, and control, and are greatly influenced by the labor-management relations climate of a given firm or industry. The effects of computer-based monitoring depend on how it is used. Allegations of "unfair" or "abusive" monitoring usually focus on questions like high or increasing quotas, inappropriate work standards or punitive use of monitoring information by supervisors. Computer-based monitoring appears most likely to be opposed or resented by employees when they perceive that it is used unfairly or when it is imposed without their understanding or participation. Conversely, in some workplaces employees accept electronic monitoring as a tool that helps them get control of their own work and ensures that their supervisors evaluate them on the basis of fair criteria.

Stress.-An additional issue is the possibility that monitoring contributes to employee stress by creating a feeling of being watched or by creating pressure to work at high speed. There is some research on effects of computer-based monitoring, but it generally fails to separate the effects of monitoring from those of job design, equipment design, lighting, workload, machine pacing, and other potentially stressful aspects of work in offices where computerized equipment is used. This area deserves further research.

Service Observation

Monitoring the content of messages raises a related set of issues. Some employers say that service observation (listening to or recording the content of employees' telephone conversations with customers) helps assure quality and correctness of information and protects all parties in case of dispute. However, service observation also impacts the privacy of the customer, and workers and labor organizations have argued that it contributes to stress of the employee, and creates an atmosphere of distrust. Service observation is legal when part of a formally established program of evaluation. In the Federal Government, employees must be informed that such a program is in effect, but do not need to be informed precisely when a supervisor is listening.

Telephone Call Accounting

Telephone call accounting (computer-generated records of the time, duration, destination, and cost of calls) gives employers a powerful tool for allocating costs to different projects, settling billing disputes with telephone companies, and discouraging nonbusiness use of telephones. Other technologies, including call blocking, authorization codes, and levels of service, can be used to limit nonbusiness uses of telephones, either instead of or in conjunction with call accounting.

The Federal Government has collected detailed call accounting data on long-distance calls for at least 10 years, but new technology would make this information easier for agencies to use on a regular basis. Privacy questions are raised when accounting records,

which are not required to be protected, are used to track the calling habits of individuals. If call accounting is going to be used by the Federal Government, development of better guidelines on acceptable levels of personal use of telephones, procedures for tracing patterns of major abuse, and guidelines for protecting call records from unauthorized use are necessary to minimize intrusions on Federal workers.

Privacy and Fairness in the Workplace

The uses of technology discussed so far are controversial because they point out a basic tension between an employer's right to control or manage the work process and an employee's right to autonomy, dignity, and privacy. This same tension is also evident in the use of other technologies for surveillance and testing in the workplace. For example, Controversy over polygraph testing, drug testing, genetic screening, and emerging brain wave testing illustrates the tension between employers' rights to manage their enterprise, reduce costs and reduce liability, and the employees' rights to preserve individual privacy and dignity. Fairness questions relate to the accuracy of the tests themselves as well as to the criteria for deciding who is to be tested. Privacy issues include employers' acquisition of personal information not related to work, and the protection of records generated by testing*

Legal and Policy Implications

There are no legal requirements in U.S. law that monitoring be "fair," that jobs be well designed or that employees be consulted about work standards, except insofar as these points are addressed in union contracts. Less than 20 percent of the office work force is unionized, and even where unions are involved, their effectiveness has been limited because technology choice and productivity measurement are often considered "management rights" under the contract. Similarly, workers are not currently protected by law against stressful working conditions, although stress can be a compensable injury under Worker Compensation statutes.