Smartphones are packed with whiz-bang technology, including the ability to pinpoint the device’s precise location using global positioning system, or GPS, coordinates.

With employer-supplied phones, that means it’s easy to track where the phone is—and by extension, the location of the employee carrying it.

Is this legal? Ethical? Practical?

When company cars and trucks are equipped with dedicated GPS devices, it’s common for employers to track vehicles’ movements. There are many good reasons to do so, such as ensuring employees stay on their scheduled routes when making deliveries.

Safety considerations are paramount. GPS permits tracking a hijacked vehicle. It lets employers see when drivers are speeding.

Generally, employers inform employees that they will use GPS capabilities to track their movements.

Employers typically obtain employee consent if the vehicle belongs to the employee. Minnesota, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia forbid tracking vehicles without the owner’s consent. (Consent typically isn’t necessary when the employer owns the vehicle and GPS device.)

When the tracked device is a smartphone (or a laptop or other electronic device), the issues are trickier, and they mostly concern employee privacy.

Several software companies sell tracking applications designed for use on employer-provided devices. They automatically generate location reports throughout the day. The apps are supposed to shut down when the employee clocks out, thus ending tracking for the day even if the employee takes the device home.

That doesn’t mean after-hours surveillance is impossible. Many devices allow owners to locate the device on a map with just a click—potentially revealing an employee’s whereabouts even when he or she is not working.

A test case in California (where criminal law prohibits tracking “movable” things) involved tracking an employee via a cell phone. That case was settled confidentially.

Advice: What’s the best course of action? Develop a policy on tracking and let employees know about it. Track only as much as is really necessary, ending tracking after work hours. Consult your attorney to be sure no state or local law dictates how, when and why you track employees.