

# Employee monitoring: Is it worth your company's effort?

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Companies sometimes turn to employee monitoring in an effort to improve things such as productivity, security, accuracy, and time management. Before instituting, however, employers must carefully weigh the benefits of employee monitoring against potential negatives.

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policing over their shoulders. In contrast, others may need occasional guidance and reminders to stay on track.”

The following are things to think about regarding employee monitoring. Since such measures bring up a variety of privacy concerns, employers always should seek legal counsel before implementing to avoid problems down the road.

## **Types of employee monitoring**

Security cameras have long provided employers with extra eyes around the workplace. Nowadays, tracking GPS on company vehicles or on company phones with locating apps provides information on employee whereabouts when outside of the office. Likewise, for years employers have been recording employee/client phone calls at customer service centers and similar establishments to hear how workers are representing the company.

To keep tabs on the arrival and departure of employees (not to mention the length of their lunchbreak), clocking in and out remains a popular way to record time spent working. Beyond old-fashioned punch cards, however, today’s time management systems allow for collecting a plethora of information, including breakdowns of hours spent on individual tasks.

Especially with the increase in staff members working from home, numerous employee monitoring measures today center around desktop surveillance. Companies can utilize tech that shows browsing history, logs keystroke activity, or takes screenshots randomly, manually, or when triggered by an activity flagged as inappropriate. Software can notify the appropriate leader when someone tries to access certain company files or when a large download that could be indicative of a data breach occurs.

One of the most controversial methods of employee monitoring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is examining an employee’s own social media activity. While many argue that it is none of an employer’s business to check what someone posts from a personal account, managers counter that they worry about revelation of confidential information or tarnishing the company brand through inappropriate sentiments.

## **Pros of employee monitoring**

Perhaps the top reason employers give for monitoring behavior is that the simple act of doing so has an impact. Knowing someone is (or might be) watching can lead to acting more responsibly and staying on task.

In terms of desktop surveillance, monitored workers may think twice about surfing the web, shopping online, or checking social media. Cameras in the workplace may deter theft and promote employees staying “on their toes” rather than lounging. They also give a glimpse of how well workers are following procedures such as obeying safety guidelines – an issue that has gained particular importance in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, recording phone conversations enables employers to spot and correct errors employees make during their interaction with customers.

Some leaders find information collected from monitoring helpful in seeing where employees are spending their time. They may find certain tasks take up more time than expected and adjust workloads as needed. Also, when evaluations or promotion opportunities come up, managers can turn to activity records to gain a larger, more accurate picture of what the person in question has done over the past few months rather than relying solely on memory.

“The main advantage of monitoring is that you know if your employees are using their work time wisely,” says Jon Hill, chairman and CEO of The Energists. “This isn’t just beneficial from a productivity standpoint, but is also helpful for providing feedback to employees about their work process. You can help employees manage their time better if you’re able to identify what’s negatively impacting their productivity.”



## Issues raised by employee monitoring

Despite potential benefits from monitoring, though, employers realize such action raises the possibility of setting up an adversarial relationship with workers.

“The main downside of monitoring is its impact on employee trust,” Hill says. “Some employees might see the monitoring as an invasion of privacy or find it adds anxiety and pressure that make it more difficult to focus on work. There’s also the issue of employees feeling like their managers don’t trust them to work independently, which can lead to feelings of defensiveness and resentment and lower overall morale.”

Other possible factors to contend with include:

- Disgruntled employees finding ways to “trick” or work around monitoring measures, which leads to unreliable information
- Figuring out how to handle surveillance vs. privacy when people bring their own device to the office or work from non-company-issued equipment at home
- Weighing the time supervisors need to scrutinize what is being monitored against other responsibilities that may actually be more beneficial to company operations
- Putting too much stock in monitoring rather than in solving underlying issues (such as why an employee feels the need to complain about your organization on social media)

## Employee monitoring choices

Since “sneaky” monitoring measures can cause a great deal of resentment (and potential legal issues), employers find transparency and spelling out their monitoring procedures helpful to acceptance. Employees told about actions upfront tend to see them as part of company procedure rather than as targeted efforts to “catch” poor behavior.

And whether in addition to employee monitoring or on its own, clearly convey expectations. Outline proper employee conduct in your handbook along with repercussions for not following. Provide feedback on performance through timely, meaningful conversations so that workers know your definition of success and can aim for optimal quantity and quality of work.

Ultimately, each company needs to decide for itself what employee monitoring measures to take, if any. Some may opt for things like time management systems but not want to touch examining personal social media accounts with a 10-foot pole. Others may find desktop surveillance truly encourages productivity or that security cameras prevent employee theft.

Realize, too, that you are not alone if you hold the opinion that needing to monitor employees signals greater problems. Working on making better hiring decisions or creating a more engaging environment may prove a better solution than debating monitoring tactics.