Can Employee Monitoring Be Done Ethically?

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If you talked to business owners, managers and employees last year, most of them would probably tell you that employee monitoring software seems excessive and intrusive. But now that COVID-19 made us rethink work-from-home policies, this industry is booming.

Many managers have realized that their employees can in fact work remotely and still complete their tasks. However, most of these companies do not have experience with remote work. What does a company do to ensure that productivity is high while tracking the attendance of their workers on a daily basis?

While monitoring solutions have proven that they can help companies on many different levels, they still raise ethical concerns. So let’s see what can be considered ethical and unethical within the monitoring space.

1. Monitoring employees in secret

The number one monitoring practice that is considered unethical, and in most cases even illegal, is monitoring employees without their knowledge or consent. This practice is considered legal when employers are suspecting malpractice, and want to catch employees red-handed. However, if companies simply want to keep an eye on their employees without telling them, they could face serious consequences.

To avoid this, always make sure your employees are aware of employee monitoring software. If possible, create a monitoring policy, including consent forms which will explain in detail what you will be monitoring, which data you will be collecting, how you will store it, and who can access it.

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2. Monitoring employees outside of working hours

After-hours monitoring has become a bigger issue in the current remote working environment. It’s not uncommon for employees to use their business laptops for personal matters while they’re on a break or once their shift is over. If you’re using the monitoring software during these hours, you could potentially record sensitive personal data that could legally implicate you.

To avoid the issue, either forbid the usage of company-owned laptops for personal use, or allow employees to turn off their trackers when the shift is over or while they’re on a break. This will also make your employees calmer about the monitoring as they’ll have full control over the software and what it monitors.

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3. Collecting personal data through employee monitoring software

Most employee monitoring software comes equipped with a screenshot feature, while some of the more intrusive ones will even allow you to record screen or keystrokes on your employees’ computers. Even though screenshots serve as proof

of work, taking them at a wrong time (when your employees are browsing social media, their bank accounts, etc.) means you would be collecting personal data you don’t want to have.

If you do want to use screenshots, find a software that will allow you to limit screenshots only to work-related apps and websites. The same goes for all other intrusive features. However, the best would be to not use any of them, since they are optional with most software providers.

4. Not using the collected data for business improvement

Ethical use of employee monitoring software isn’t only defined by the ways you collect the data, it’s about how you’re using it as well. If you’re only using the software for the sake of using it, or for the sake of spying on your employees, you’re wasting your time.

If you really want to get the best out of it, while keeping your employees on board, you need to have a proper plan. Figure out why you actually want to monitor your employees, what data you need, and set up some goals. For example, if you’re using an employee monitoring software to increase the productivity of your teams, make sure you’re tracking how much daily productive time they have (most software options calculate this automatically). Once you have that information, see what causes the productivity to go down. Is it the fact that too much time is spent in meetings? Are your employees spending more time than necessary on social media? Pinpoint the issues that cause bottlenecks and tackle them by talking to your employees and figuring out the plan to minimize these distractions.

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Final word on employee monitoring

Although some might disagree, employee monitoring can be ethical. However, it’s all in your hands. If you really want to make sure you’re monitoring your workers in an ethical way, think about how you would feel if your daily activities were monitored? Additionally, make sure you follow these four simple rules we’ve talked about, and you won’t run into any ethical issues.

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