Personality as a moderator of monitoring acceptance☆

David Zweig[a,*], Jane Webster[b]

[a]*Division of Management, University of Toronto at Scarborough, 1265 Military Trail, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M1C 1A4*
[b]*Queen's School of Business, Queen's University, 99 University Avenue, Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6*

Abstract

Organizational efforts at monitoring employee activity must be perceived as respecting privacy and fairness. However, even when monitoring systems are designed to do so, employees might not be willing to accept and use monitoring technologies. This study examined whether personality moderated the relationship between workplace monitoring system characteristics, fairness, privacy and acceptance. Six hundred and twenty-two participants were asked to provide their assessment of an awareness monitoring system (that determines employee availability to interact with geographically distributed colleagues) and to complete a five-factor measure of personality (i.e. extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness to experience, and conscientiousness). Results indicated that emotional stability and extraversion altered the relationships between the paths in a model of monitoring acceptance. Specifically, people who scored lower in extraversion and emotional stability were less likely to endorse positive attitudes toward monitoring, even with privacy and fairness safeguards in place. Implications for the expansion of models of workplace monitoring and for the practice of monitoring in organizations are discussed.
© 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Monitoring; Personality; Fairness; Privacy

1. Introduction

Electronic monitoring of employee activities is becoming increasingly pervasive in organizations (Alge & Ballinger, 2001). Although numerous studies have examined the effects of electronic performance monitoring (EPM) on outcomes such as personal control (Stanton & Barnes-Farrell, 1996), productivity (Aiello & Kolb, 1995; Larson & Callahan, 1990), privacy (Alge, 1999), fairness (Ambrose & Alder, 2000), and performance (Ambrose & Kulik, 1994), very few studies have looked at individual differences in predicting monitoring outcomes. Instead, researchers have investigated the influence of the situation (being monitored) and resulting outcomes (attitudes and behaviors). What is missing is information on individual characteristics. Thus, the question addressed in this investigation is whether individual difference variables—specifically personality variables—moderate the relationships between monitoring system characteristics (e.g. the frequency of monitoring) and outcomes such as perceptions of privacy, fairness and acceptance. Addressing this question will add an important piece of information to our understanding of reactions to monitoring.

Although personality characteristics relate to important organizational outcomes (Funder, 2001), few studies have examined them in a monitoring context. One exception is a study by Douthitt and Aiello (2000): monitored individuals who were higher in negative affectivity reported lower levels of task satisfaction. Further, Robie and Ryan (1999) found that conscientiousness only predicted task performance when participants knew that they were being monitored. Finally, in a qualitative field study of video-based monitoring, Webster (1998) found that introverts were less likely to use these systems. Nevertheless, we still know very little about the moderating effects of individual difference variables on monitoring outcomes. Consequently, researchers such as McKnight and Webster (2001) and Stanton (2000) have called for further investigations into how personality variables might influence perceptions and attitudes toward monitoring. The present study seeks to examine these effects.

1.1. Personality and monitoring system acceptance

This investigation concerning the moderating effects of personality focuses on reactions to awareness monitoring systems. These new monitoring technologies are being designed to enhance communications between geographically distributed colleagues (Lee & Girgensohn, 2002), rather than to measure job performance as with EPM. These awareness technologies operate on the principle that if the employee is aware of when his/her geographically distributed colleague is available to interact, the employee can be more effective in communicating with that colleague. Thus, a typical awareness monitoring system might capture a video-based image of the distributed colleague and transmit this image to the co-worker interested in engaging in communication (e.g. Erickson & Kellogg, 2000).

Awareness systems have been implemented in organizations such as NYNEX and Xerox (Lee, Schlueter, & Girgensohn, 1997) and have been embraced by the