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Employee reactions to electronic performance monitoring: A consequence of organizational culture

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Abstract

Research recognizes that reactions to monitoring may be moderated by several factors, but ignores the role of organizational culture. This paper argues that bureaucratic cultures will respond more favorably to monitoring than supportive cultures. Involving employees in designing the system, monitoring groups, and restricting monitoring to performance-related activities may improve attitudes toward monitoring in supportive cultures. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Organizations are naturally interested in monitoring their employees' performance. Employee performance monitoring permits organizations to assess whether or not the organization is getting what it is paying for. Monitoring also permits supervisors to obtain valuable performance information that can be used for employee development. Thus, organizations have monitored their employees for centuries (US Congress, 1987). However, recent advances in electronic technology are transforming the nature of employee perform-

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ance monitoring. In contrast to supervisory monitoring, electronic performance monitoring (EPM) is constant, pervasive, and unblinking.

Not surprisingly, an increasing number of organizations are turning to EPM in an effort to increase the effectiveness of their monitoring efforts. In 1987, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) estimated that 6 million US workers were electronically monitored (US Congress, 1987). Recent estimates indicate that at least 40 million US workers may be subject to electronic monitoring (Botan, 1996) and that as many as 75% of large companies electronically monitor their employees (American Management Association, 2000).

It is also not surprising that the extensive and growing use of EPM engenders considerable debate among business groups, employee advocate groups, and politicians (Greenlaw & Prunceanu, 1997; Hays, 1999; Kovach, Conner, Livneh, Scallan, & Schwartz, 2000). For example, proponents of EPM argue that it is an indispensable tool that benefits both organizations and their employees. There are a number of reasons why organizations view electronic monitoring as an economic necessity. For example, EPM can help increase productivity, improve quality and service, and reduce costs. Organizations may also monitor employees for reasons less directly related to job performance. For example, monitoring may help businesses avoid legal liability, negative publicity, and security breaches (Stanton & Weiss, 2000; Williams, 2000). Proponents of monitoring also argue that the practice may benefit employees by producing more objective performance appraisals and improved feedback (Angel, 1989; Henriques, 1986a, 1986b).

Critics counter that EPM invades consumer and employee privacy, decreases job satisfaction, increases stress, and engenders work environments characterized by diminished trust and negative work relationships (Greengard, 1996; Lewis, 1999; Piturro, 1989). They frequently refer to monitoring systems with descriptors like “Big Brother,” “Orwellian,” “electronic sweatshops,” and “electronic whips” (Bylinksy, 1991; Garson, 1988; Lewis, 1999; Nussbaum & duRivage, 1986; Schulhof, 1998). As a result of this intense debate over the costs and benefits of EPM, a number of US senators and members of Congress have proposed legislation intended to restrict the amount of monitoring organizations can conduct (see DeTienne & Alder, 1995; Mishra & Crampton, 1998 for reviews).

The wide divergence of opinion concerning EPM suggests that employees may not react the same way to monitoring across all settings. Instead, a number of factors may influence workers’ reactions to EPM. Unfortunately, there is little theoretical explanation as to why individuals may respond differently in some cases than in others. I argue that the literature on organizational culture may provide a key piece to this puzzle. Specifically, I argue that employee reactions to EPM will vary as a function of organizational culture and that certain types of organizational cultures will be more receptive to EPM than will other types. I further suggest that EPM will be more successful when organizations design, implement, and utilize EPM systems in a manner consistent with the organization’s culture. Below, I first review the literature on EPM. Subsequently, I discuss research on organizational culture. Then, I examine the link between EPM and culture. Finally, I discuss implications of this integration for practice and research.

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