Balancing Trust and Surveillance in Hybrid Work: Insights from a Pilot Study on Workplace Monitoring

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Abstract: Many knowledge workers have shifted to work hybrid by being partly in the office and partly at remote locations. This brings freedom for knowledge workers, but managers are concerned about the performance of their workforce when they are not working from the office. One means to check performance constantly is by collecting and analyzing performance and behavior data to monitor employees, which is a form of algorithmic control. On the one hand, this can lead to conflicts between employees and managers as employees feel that managers mistrust them. On the other hand, employees might trust transparent monitoring that helps them focus on core tasks. To learn more about balancing trust and surveillance, this pilot study surveyed 45 knowledge workers in an engineering company in Denmark, a country with high levels of trust in society. We developed an online survey to investigate managers' and employees' opinions about workplace monitoring. We found that all participants had a negative to neutral attitude toward monitoring, although managers were slightly more favorable. Furthermore, data collection for work-related purposes to improve the work situation might be appropriate, although a trustful relationship between managers and employees is the most important. Thus, if a form of monitoring is going to be introduced at the workplace, it is essential that all stakeholders – managers, employees, HR, and union representatives – are involved and that complete transparency is achieved in terms of which data is collected and for which purposes. Only then can a balance between trust and surveillance be achieved, including maintaining a positive working climate.

Keywords: Hybrid Knowledge Work; Workplace Monitoring, Algorithmic Control, Trust

1. Introduction

In recent years, a transformation of work practices has been underway, where knowledge workers work partly from the office and partly from anywhere, allowing greater flexibility but continuing the collaboration with fellow knowledge workers at the office. As organizations transition towards a more structured system of hybrid work arrangements, there is a concern about workers' performance when they are not visible in the office. On the one hand, working from home can help workers solve their work-life conflicts, which leads to higher job satisfaction and, thus, higher performance (Naqshbandi et al., 2023). On the other hand, working from home can cross the line between work and family life and thus lead to lower performance (Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021) or does not improve performance as the family might disrupt the work or people feel isolated (De Valdenebro Campo et al., 2021).

From a managerial perspective, working from home or anywhere has consistently raised concerns surrounding the potential loss of managerial control (Eurofound, 2020). Implementing worker monitoring practices seems like a cost-effective solution to address these concerns (Ball, 2021). Monitoring is observing and tracking employees' activities, primarily during remote work (Ball, 2010). Such monitoring technologies encompass a wide range of tools and methodologies, including but not limited to keystroke logging, tracking online search histories, and the use of digital surveillance systems (Eurofound, 2020). In 2020, the global demand for employee monitoring software was growing, with a 108% increase in April and a 70% rise in May compared to figures from 2019 (Brown, 2020). Research suggests that a significant proportion of employers have already integrated such monitoring tools into their companies: A US study found that almost 80% of employers reported using employee monitoring software to track performance and online activity among remote employees. Similarly, Gartner research indicates that the global adoption of tracking tools will increase from 60% registered at the beginning of the pandemic to 70% within the next three years (Hickok & Maslej, 2023). This is also confirmed by a Danish survey, which indicates that 63% of employees experience workplace monitoring with data collection (The Danish Society of Engineers, IDA, 2024). The case of Denmark is especially interesting, as the country scores high in trust in society and at the workplace (OECD, 2020), which might also relate to the hybrid work situation. Although Danish managers might be interested in learning more about their workers' performance when working outside the office, monitoring them would raise mistrust. Furthermore, following the European GDPR, options for workplace monitoring are limited and should not break into workers' privacy at home.

Managers seek ways to monitor their workforce effectively, which can lead to tensions between employees and management. Understanding the different attitudes of employees and managers towards workplace monitoring is therefore essential before extensive monitoring is introduced. Based on a survey among knowledge workers and their managers in a Danish Engineering company, this study aims to answer the following two research questions:

1. Do employees and their managers perceive workplace monitoring differently?
2. What data types do remote employees consider acceptable for sharing within the context of monitoring?

2. Literature Background

2.1 Monitoring as Algorithmic Control at the Workplace

Artificial intelligence increasingly influences people's work and thus also influences human resource management by relying on data and algorithms for managerial decisions (Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2022). This algorithmic management is the "large-scale collection and use of data to develop and improve learning algorithms that carry out coordination and control functions traditionally performed by managers" (Möhlmann et al., 2021, p. 2005). Algorithmic management, as a part of Artificial Intelligence techniques, has been conceptualized in algorithmic control and algorithmic matching (Möhlmann et al., 2021). Kellog et al. (2020) discuss six different forms of algorithmic control, one of which is algorithmic recording (or monitoring), where any data on employees is collected and analyzed during their work. Algorithmic management is often discussed in a gig work context but also exists in traditional work settings (Lippert et al., 2023).

Worker monitoring in companies is not a new idea, as it can be traced back to U.S. history from the early to mid-19th century. The introduction of structured shifts, production quotas, and strict timekeeping created a more regulated work environment than prior labor practices. This necessitated increased supervision to ensure productivity and efficiency, which prompted the beginning of worker monitoring (Hickok & Maslej, 2023). While tools like time clocks or cameras were historically used for monitoring performance, digitalization of many knowledge workers' tasks, electronic data collection, and analytics allow for measuring performance and the workers' behavior. Through systematic digital behavior analysis, these tools provide insights into individual and collective behaviors, unravel work patterns, and identify key contributors to overall productivity. Several tools are already available on the market, e.g., Prodoscore, which collects metrics about the utilization of tools, internal collaboration, and workload for activity analysis and performance measurement (Prodoscore, n.d.). Another tool is Teramind, which tracks keystrokes, website, and application usage and assesses files to detect threads and monitor productivity and compliance (Teramind, n.d.).

Policies and guidelines governing employee monitoring, when primarily aligned with the interests of the employer rather than the employees, can trigger privacy concerns (Chang et al., 2015). In general, employers do not need employees' consent for various forms of monitoring if it is based on the legitimate legal interest of the employer. Employers must follow GDPR principles when handling personal data during monitoring, ensuring lawful and transparent data processing, accuracy, limited data retention, security, and being accountable for compliance.

Jeske (2022) identified two purposes for monitoring workers: (1) Employees can only be trusted to work in the company's best interest when visible in the office. This can lead to resistance from employees toward monitoring, and thus, poorer performance and conflicts between employers and employees. (2) Monitoring allows employees to get an overview of the current performance and helps them to focus better on core tasks. This higher transparency can lead to trust among employees, especially if they are involved in the design of the monitoring systems.

Vitak and Zimmer (2023) found from a survey among U.S. adults that the acceptability of workplace surveillance practices is context-dependent and that reductions in privacy and autonomy at work could amplify power imbalances, particularly among vulnerable employees. The authors conclude that some forms of workplace monitoring are justified, such as tracking work-related communication and ensuring security. Nevertheless, they express concerns about the extent of data collection and the proliferation of predictive algorithms that claim to predict hiring, firing, and promotions.

2.2 Workplace Monitoring in Denmark

Understanding how individuals react to the implementation of workplace monitoring is crucial for organizations aiming to foster a positive work environment while embracing technological advancements. Denmark is known for fostering a strong sense of trust in workplaces, and this characteristic plays a crucial role in the country's work culture. The Danish work environment traditionally thrives on mutual trust between employers and employees. This trust is deeply embedded in the social fabric. It is reflected in various aspects of the workplace, such as open communication, collaborative decision-making processes, and a generally flat organizational structure.

A Danish representative questionnaire among managers in Danish workplaces found that digital tools for collecting employee data are widespread in the Danish labor market and that most people have experienced them already (Hald et al., 2024). It reveals a divided landscape, with nearly half of the managers expressing support for data collection while a substantial minority remains skeptical. A key finding of the report underscores the significance of communication and guidelines in fostering trust and a healthy working environment in the context of data ethics. The survey found that managers who openly communicate about collecting employee data with their employees are less likely to damage their relationship with their workforce.

3. Methodology

Data was collected through an online survey in a Danish Engineering company in November/December 2023. The company has a general policy allowing people to work 2-3 days from home, but it is up to the manager to decide based on the specific task they need to perform. They keep track of their tasks via MS TEAMS to ensure transparency and project work if a worker needs to take over another colleague's tasks. The company does not use any digital monitoring tools on the individual level. However, the task performance is measured so that it becomes transparent how much time was spent on a task for project management reasons. This can be used to compare task performance, e.g., between departments, which could lead to additional training or providing better tools to solve tasks.

The survey collected demographic information and answers to 12 questions inspired by the Theory of Planned Behavior regarding attitudes toward surveillance, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (see Table 2). The questions used a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1='Strongly Disagree' and 7='Strongly Agree.' The questions were analyzed with a T-Test to answer our research question 1 about the different perceptions of managers and employees toward monitoring.

Furthermore, a factorial vignette design was used to answer our second research question, inspired by (Vitak & Zimmer, 2023). This experimental and survey design mix helps investigate judgments in a particular context and under certain conditions (Wallander, 2009). Following this approach, the survey participants had to evaluate different vignettes around workplace monitoring, using the question:

Your company will begin collecting and monitoring employee data through a new company software. [Data collected] may be collected to [purpose of data collection].

Table 1 overviews the two factors and items combined to build the vignettes. The items ranged from reasonable regarding work practices to issues that might be considered highly private. Combining the two factors in Table 1, 64 scenarios would be possible. To keep the answering time for the survey low, every participant got only a randomly assigned set of 32 scenarios for evaluation.

To back up our results and get deeper insights into the participants' perceptions toward monitoring, open questions were included at the end of the survey regarding how workplace monitoring would influence the workplace positively and negatively.

Table 1: Factors and Items for the vignettes, inspired by (Vitak & Zimmer, 2023)

Factor	Nr. of levels	Items
Data collected	8	The average length of your work sessions and the length of the breaks you take during the workday
		Internet usage and website history
		The task completion time and amounts
		Communication logs (emails, chats)

Factor	Nr. of levels	Items
		File and document access history
		The record of all keys typed on your computer and your mouse activity
		Webcam and audio recordings
		Work phone activities
Purpose of data collection	8	Evaluate performance and give individual feedback
		Identify individual training and development needs
		Determine eligibility for promotions and higher compensation
		Ensure compliance with company policies
		Enhance team collaboration and communication
		Ensure healthy working environments
		Improve worker productivity
		Monitor the effectiveness of remote work tools

The participants were asked to rate the appropriateness of each vignette on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating 'Highly Inappropriate' and 7 representing 'Highly Appropriate'. Every survey participant got 32 scenarios to evaluate. The data is hierarchical, as the participants responded individually, and the responses for multiple scenarios by the same individual are not independent. Given this, Linear Mixed Effects Models (LMMs, (Hox et al., 1991)), especially restricted maximum likelihood (REML), are well-suited for analyzing hierarchical data structures, as they allow for the modeling of both fixed effects (population-level effects) and random effects (individual-level effects). This approach accounted for the correlation among responses from the same individual while treating responses from different individuals as independent.

Forty-five complete answers were collected in the company. From them, 82.2% were male and 17.8% female, with an age range between 24 and 69 (average age 42). 98% were full-time workers, and they came from various departments, but most of them worked in the engineering or the sales and marketing departments, which are classic knowledge workers' areas. Most survey participants have worked for several years in the company, with an average of 18 hours per week from home. One-third (N=15) were managers; the other 30 answers came from employees.

4. Findings

4.1 Different Perceptions of Managers and Employees

As can be seen in Table 2, both managers and employees expressed relatively low scores in the "Attitude toward monitoring" questions, indicating a general skepticism or negative outlook towards the benefits of monitoring for productivity, data confidentiality, and communication with managers (all mean values show negative opinions below the neutral point 4). As for the questions within the "Social norms" category, there is a perceptible shift toward a more positive stance, with scores closer to the neutral point 4 on the scale. In the "Perceived behavioral control" questions, managers and employees exhibit balanced scores, reflecting a more confident perception of their ability to adapt to monitoring tools and maintain effective work-life balance. Significant differences between managers and employees can be only seen in two social norm questions, where managers score significantly higher than employees regarding following the higher-level management's monitoring opinions.

4.2 Vignette Analysis

The first model used LMM on all eight values in the collected data attributes (Table 1). The dependent variable was the "perceived appropriateness". Similar to (Vitak & Zimmer, 2023), the item "communication logs (emails, chats)" was used as constant as it was the attribute with the least privacy concerns. According to the results in Table 3, "Work phone activities" and "task completion time and amounts" have the highest Z-Score and are thus perceived as highly appropriate with a significant p-value (see Table 3). This may be attributed to privacy concerns, a desire for autonomy in online activities, perceived intrusiveness, or potential cultural and organizational factors.

Table 2: Results from the T-Test for managers and employees

Category	Item	Manager Mean (SD)	Employee Mean (SD)	T-value	p-value
Attitude toward monitoring	I believe that remote monitoring of my work enhances my productivity.	2.73 (1.870)	2.33 (1.605)	0.708	0.485 n.s.
	I think remote monitoring is beneficial for maintaining data confidentiality and preventing unauthorized access.	3.00 (1.648)	3.00 (1.597)	0.000	1.0 n.s.
	I feel that remote monitoring respects my privacy and is not intrusive	3.20 (2.042)	2.47 (1.795)	1.181	0.249 n.s.
	I believe that remote work monitoring would contribute to a better performance evaluation.	2.93 (1.792)	2.40 (1.499)	0.992	0.331 n.s.
Subjective norms	I think remote monitoring is a necessary tool for improving communication with my manager.	2.60 (1.805)	2.27 (1.760)	0.589	0.561 n.s.
	I think that my friends, family, and colleagues have influence on my opinions	3.27 (1.831)	3.73 (1.999)	-0.781	0.441 n.s.
	I feel like my decision to support remote monitoring aligns with the expectations of my immediate supervisor.	4.07 (1.668)	2.77 (1.612)	2.493	0.019 *
	I perceive strong social pressure to comply with management's decisions in regard to remote monitoring practices.	3.73 (1.580)	2.63 (1.520)	2.230	0.034 *
Perceived behavioral control	I feel confident in my ability to adapt to remote monitoring tools and processes.	3.93 (1.710)	3.80 (1.864)	0.239	0.813 n.s.
	I feel in control over the way remote monitoring is implemented in my workplace.	4.07 (1.792)	3.70 (1.765)	0.650	0.521 n.s.
	I feel capable of managing my work effectively while being monitored remotely	4.00 (1.890)	3.57 (2.046)	0.705	0.486 n.s.
	I feel confident in my ability to maintain a work-life balance while being remotely monitored.	3.80 (2.077)	3.50 (1.978)	0.464	0.646 n.s.

Table 3: Results for LLM – data collected

Item	Coefficient	Mean (SD)	Z-score	p-value
The average length of your work sessions and the length of the breaks you take during the workday	0.281	0.291 (1.283)	1.283	0.200
Internet usage and website history	0.158	0.171 (0.922)	0.922	0.356
The task completion time and amounts	0.607	0.120 (5.049)	5.049	0.000***
File and document access history	0.249	0.199 (1.251)	1.251	0.211
The record of all keys typed on your computer and your mouse activity	0.562	0.210 (2.678)	2.678	0.007***
Webcam and audio recordings	0.213	0.165 (1.290)	1.290	0.197
Work phone activities	0.913	0.034 (26.570)	26.570	0.000***

In the second model (Table 4), regarding the purpose of data collection, "ensuring compliance with company policies" is used as a constant, following (Vitak & Zimmer, 2023). "Determining eligibility for promotions and higher compensation and "improving worker productivity" gained the highest and significant Z-Scores and are thus considered highly appropriate (Table 4). On the other hand, purposes such as "Monitoring the effectiveness of remote work tools" and "Ensuring healthy working environments" showed lower Z-Scores that were not significant.

Table 4: LLM results for data collection

Item	Coefficient	Mean (SD)	Z-score	p-value
Evaluate performance and give individual feedback	0.627	0.314 (1.999)	1.999	0.046**
Identify individual training and development needs	0.507	0.258 (1.969)	1.969	0.049**
Determine eligibility for promotions and higher compensation	0.701	0.091 (8.054)	8.054	0.000***
Enhance team collaboration and communication	0.617	0.269 (2.297)	2.297	0.022**
Ensure healthy working environments	0.479	0.301 (1.592)	1.592	0.111
Improve worker productivity	0.859	0.113 (7.627)	7.627	0.000***
Monitor the effectiveness of remote work tools	0.309	0.278 (1.113)	1.112	0.266

These differences may stem from the nature of the purposes themselves. Objectives directly related to individual growth and career advancement, like promotions and productivity improvement, may be perceived as inherently aligned with personal and organizational success. In contrast, monitoring tools associated with broader organizational effectiveness or health considerations might introduce more complex perceptions, potentially triggering privacy concerns or uncertainties.
Furthermore, we looked at age, gender, and role (manager, employee). Age (coefficient 6.915, p=0.006***) positively affects the perceived appropriateness. Gender is not significant. Role (coefficient 5.927, p=0.000***) also positively affects perceived appropriateness. The interaction terms are not statistically significant.

4.3 Open Questions for Monitoring and Data Collection

Negative to neutral opinions toward monitoring and data collection were also expressed in the answers to the open questions. Managers expressed that monitoring "*is the same as micromanagement*" and "*…a sign of serious mistrust in employees*" – trust and a good relationship with their employees are vital for the surveyed managers. If monitoring was implemented, it would require "*a lot of transparency and agreed start*." One manager expressed that "*…time and time efforts are not a good monitoring tool*", especially when discussing knowledge work.
Also, the employees mentioned trust as very important, e.g., "*it feels that they do not trust that I do my work." Moreover, "it will damage the trust in the company and management."* and "*this is an invasion of privacy*." Several participants would consider working less from home when monitoring would be introduced or even changing the company. Nevertheless, one employee mentioned that he trusts the company *"…will keep my data safe, that is what we do here*." Another issue is the unique nature of work that the employees do, "*so-called brain work – you can't put a timer on this."* The survey participants mentioned that ideas might be developed in front of the coffee machine, during lunch breaks, or on the way home, and not in front of the computer. Hence, monitoring knowledge work is generally different.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Our results show that monitoring work was considered negative to neutral among the survey participants. For the first research question regarding the different perspectives toward workplace monitoring, we found that managers always scored higher than employees. However, significant differences could only be found in the subjective norms, as managers agree more that they need to be aligned with their supervisors regarding monitoring. The reason might be that managers consider the benefits this implementation could bring the company. Some advantages are optimization in resource allocation, streamlining workflows, and identifying areas for improvement, ultimately leading to cost savings and improved productivity. From the employees' side, monitoring might negatively affect their performance and job satisfaction and lead to enhanced stress, as discussed in (Siegel et al., 2022). In a high-trust country like Denmark, the concerns toward monitoring may also be rooted in the perceived lack of trust (as employees cannot be trusted when not visible in the office) (Chang et al., 2015), concerns related to privacy (The Danish Society of Engineers, IDA, n.d.), and potential negative consequences associated with the implementation of monitoring tools.

The vignette scenarios addressed the second research question, discovering the acceptability of various data types and purposes for monitoring remote employees' work. "Work phone activities" and "task completion time and amounts" were universally perceived as the most appropriate for monitoring. The latter attribute aligns with the research by (Vitak & Zimmer, 2023). Furthermore, monitoring "task completion" is already regularly

done in our case company as it is crucial for project management. Regarding the purposes of data collection, ”Determining eligibility for promotions or higher compensation” and ”improving worker productivity” were seen as the most appropriate data collection purposes for monitoring, aligning with organizational goals related to career advancement and overall efficiency, as also seen in the Danish survey conducted by (Hald et al., 2024).

The biggest issue with introducing workplace monitoring among managers and employees was the concern about the decrease in trust, which is especially an issue in Denmark as a country of high trust (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2014). If workplace monitoring should be introduced, it is necessary to balance trust and surveillance and thus include all stakeholders from the beginning – employees, managers, HR, and union representatives. The reason for the monitoring needs to be clear to all, and only acceptable data (e.g., task completions) for acceptable purposes (e.g., ensuring compliance or promotion) should be collected so that it becomes clear who is using data for what. Furthermore, feedback sessions should be introduced to discuss the monitoring and its effects and hear about the employees' concerns. However, as the survey participants expressed, a good relationship between managers and employees is very important, and trust is much better than micromanagement. If monitoring is used to support employees instead of suppressing them, it can even help to increase trust (Jeske, 2022).

This pilot study has limitations, as it included only 45 managers and employees in one Danish Engineering company. This introduces the possibility that those who chose not to participate in the survey might hold different perspectives or experiences than those who responded. This potential bias affected the generalizability of our findings. Furthermore, as the company does not use extensive workplace monitoring, this study could only ask for perceptions toward the influence of monitoring at the workplace. Furthermore, we could not investigate the effect of an already-used tool. In the future, data collection needs to be extended to gain deeper insights into workplace monitoring perceptions.

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