

'Assume You're Being Monitored, Because You Probably Are'—the Future of Workplace Surveillance

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'Assume You're Being Monitored, Because You Probably Are'—the Future of Workplace Surveillance

By Adam Forrester VICE

Photo via [Wikimedia](#)

Workplace surveillance used to be an amateur business. Back in the early days of Microsoft, [Bill Gates personally memorized](#) his employees' license plates so he could keep track of who was arriving late or leaving early. A bit creepy, perhaps, but endearingly old school—the sort of pathetic scheme a crafty loafer like George Costanza would get around by leaving a car parked permanently at work so everyone would think he's still at his desk.

Skiving isn't so easy these days. A coldly efficient kind of cyber monitoring is entering the office that can ensure every keyboard stroke is accounted for, your computer can be randomly screen-grabbed, and even your sleep can be monitored to make sure you're achieving optimal performance.

Journalists at *the Daily Telegraph* recently arrived at work to find [OccupEyemotion sensors](#) attached to their desks. Staff were informed that the boxes were there to help the company identify "times of low usage" to save on energy bills. The journalists kicked up a fuss, believing this move was actually more about picking which staff members would be laid off as the company downsized, and the sensors were removed. BuzzFeed [revealed](#) the sense of paranoia the episode has created: "Never before has taking a shit on company time felt so rebellious," one reporter told them.

Workers' rebellions remain few and far between, however, while cyber surveillance of our desks is becoming increasingly common. Relentless monitoring of performance is no longer the preserve of call centers. It's now moved into the wider working world.

"There really isn't much privacy left in the workplace," says Lewis Maltby, director of the US National Workrights Institute. "You're often being monitored, whether you know it or not. Employers don't always tell you what they're doing."

Europeans might assume their privacy is better protected than Americans. But last month a chilling decision by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) established a precedent for employers to sift through your private messages if they suspect you're slacking.

The case revolved around a Romanian engineer who was fired after his company discovered he was using Yahoo Messenger to chat with his fiancée on a work computer. [ECHR judges decided](#) that it was not unreasonable for an employer "to verify that employees were completing their professional tasks during working hours."

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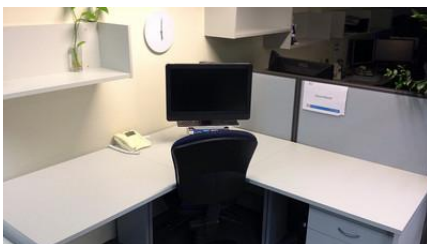
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Even if you like your boss, you shouldn't assume your company trusts you or respects your privacy. Software like Worksnaps allows employers to take regular screenshots of online activities, count the number of keystrokes made, and even capture webcam images. [Worksnaps' testimonials](#) reveal managers' enthusiasm for "keeping track of time" and making sure "nobody is allowed to be dead weight." One US business owner reveals how the software helped her "weed out those who were chatting on Facebook and playing games."

Others are experimenting with [microphones and analytic tools](#) to monitor face-to-face interactions between employees. Amazon has [an internal online tool](#) where workers are encouraged to comment on each other's achievements and slip-ups. Employees [call each other "Amabots"](#) as a compliment. "The company is running a continual performance improvement algorithm on its staff," said Amy Michaels, a former Kindle marketer for Amazon.

Being out on the road offers no escape. A former sales executive in California currently has a [lawsuit pending](#) against her former employer, claiming she was fired because she disabled a GPS app on the company iPhone that tracked her whereabouts 24 hours a day.

So where is all this leading? If businesses are increasingly obsessed with productivity data, is goofing off a dying art? And at what point in the working day are we entitled to assume our actions are no longer being logged, aggregated, and analyzed?

"It concerns me that people who work from home—people who are logged onto a company system on a personal computer—are becoming subject to monitoring and data analysis just as if [they] were at work," says Lewis Maltby. "It makes the separation between work and personal communication more difficult."

The boundary between professional and private is now so blurred, it's difficult to know where one begins and the other ends. "As far as work-life balance goes, that's a thing of the past," says Jacob Morgan, author of [The Future of Work](#). "We're moving towards work-life integration, where you bring your work home with you and your personal life with you to work."

So don't be surprised if your employer starts inquiring about your physical fitness, or, creepier still, becomes interested in how well you're sleeping.

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Big companies like BP America have already [given employees Fitbits](#) to try to reduce healthcare costs. Dr. Chris Brauer, director of innovations at Goldsmiths, University of London, believes there is more scope for wearables in the workplace, both to monitor well-being and "develop rich behavioral and lifestyle profiles."

"It's about using data points that weren't previously visible," he says. "If you're a hedge fund, you want people who are going to perform well under high stress. So are you just going to do traditional things like psychometric testing? Or are you better off letting an analyst look at the data of how they're actually performing? You can work out if someone is biometrically aligned to a particular role."

Still, there may well be a place for emotional interaction among human workbots. Dave Coplin, chief envisioning officer for Microsoft, [predicts holograms and other visuals](#) will give us the chance to offer "empathy presence" if we can't be at a meeting in person.

If you don't like the idea of being reduced to a series of data points, you're not the only one. "I think it's silly, because ultimately we're not machines," says Lewis Maltby. "Employers are so in love with trying to measure things. But some things—the things that really matter about how good a person is at their job—can't always be measured."

"The invasive systems companies have put in place go beyond common sense," he adds. "Autonomy about how to do your job is disappearing, just as privacy has disappeared. Assume you're monitored. Because you probably are."

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