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Online Monitoring Perceptions of North Texas HR Managers

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With businesses losing billions to computer crime and employees wasting considerable time on their computers looking at sports updates, the latest fashion trends, and even less appropriate websites, businesses are cracking down by monitoring their employees. The efforts are to ultimately reduce scams, identify theft, computer crimes, fraud, sexual abuse, piracy, and threats. As a result, many businesses have resorted to online monitoring of their workplace computers.

In this context, we look at how human resources (HR) professionals see three aspects of online monitoring. First, how do they view the discipline managers provide

employees based on what they see about them on the Internet? Second, how do HR managers view employee handbook online monitoring policies? Should employees be permitted to freely use their computers, have certain constraints, or have all private use banned?

To find out this information, Malcolm Coco, one of our coauthors, surveyed attendees of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) monthly meetings in North Texas. Two hundred sixteen respondents completed an organizational online ethics survey between February and May 2011.

Approximately 30 percent of attendees completed the survey. Questionnaires from Abilene, Dallas, Amarillo, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Grand Prairie, San Angelo, Lubbock, San Marcos, Wichita Falls, Stephenville, and Brownwood chapters in Texas were obtained. The majority of the sample was human resources managers from businesses that had 500 or fewer employees.

Abbreviations: “%” means percentage of respondents; “N” means number of respondents; “Mean” is the mathematical average of the rankings.

Results

As shown in Table 1, in 26 percent of respondent organizations, no one was affirmed to monitor online behavior. About 61 percent of respondent organizations had policies concerning online behavior. Of those policies, 37 percent banned social networking during work hours.

Results concerning human resource professional perceptions of the most ethical reasons to impose discipline on an employee among items are listed in Table 2. The statement “is shown with unauthorized company equipment at home” had a 3.92 rating. “Has his/her location monitored and is shown to be at a bar during work hours” was second with a 3.61 rating. In last place was “is seen romantically with your spouse or significant other outside of the company.”

Results concerning human resource professional perceptions of company monitoring rights in Table 3 show that the highest ethical monitoring policy is that employee monitoring will be done for business-related reasons only (3.98 rating on a 1-5 scale with 5 being considered most ethical). The least ethical item listed was “employee online monitoring will be done for any reason” with a 2.60 rating.

Discussion

Based on the survey results in Table 1, most organizations have policies governing the online behavior of employees. To enforce those policies, a wide variety of individuals such as human resources managers, information technology professionals, and corporate managers may monitor online activity.

Table 1: Online Monitoring Characteristics

Questions	%	N
<i>Who monitors online behavior in your organization?</i>		
Information technologists	45	98
No one	26	57
Human resources managers	25	55
Top managers	20	44
Don't know	13	28
Other	12	26
<i>Does your organization have any policy associated with online behavior?</i>		
Yes	61	133
No	39	85
<i>If “yes,” does your organization ban social networking during work hours?</i>		
Yes	37	49
No	63	84

Table 2: Perceptions of Managerial Discipline

Ethics Issues	Mean*	N
<i>A manager monitors the online characteristics of company employees. The manager imposes discipline based on the following information. The employee:</i>		
Is shown with unauthorized company equipment at home	3.92	215
Has his/her location monitored and is shown to be at a bar during working hours	3.61	215
Criticizes the company's managers	3.23	212
Shows explicit pictures of him/herself on the web	3.23	213
Has a police record of domestic violence against his/her spouse	2.97	214
Reveals he/she will leave the company and accept a job with a competitor in one month	2.88	213
Shows pictures of him/herself obviously drunk in a local bar	2.58	213
Reveals his/her pay, though there is no policy against doing that	2.53	212
Is seen romantically with your spouse or significant other outside of the company	2.26	211

*1 = very unethical, 2 = unethical, 3 = neutral, 4 = ethical, 5 = very ethical.

Table 2 shows the discipline implications of the web monitoring. If an employee is discovered to have unauthorized equipment at home, many respondents viewed discipline associated with that as relatively ethical.

There are many ethical implications from just this one example that need to be discussed. On the more ethical side, businesses need to protect their property and have a right to look at the Internet to see if their property has been stolen or improperly used. A photograph of an employee with the company's computer equipment at his or her home could be grounds for termination.

On the less ethical side, the reliability of the Internet information can be highly questionable. For example, that computer equipment shown in a photograph at employee's home may be identical to computer equipment at the company, but the employee purchased the computer equipment for his or her own use. Photographs on the Internet can be doctored to falsely place inappropriate objects in other people's

homes. People can make false statements about others in blogs or social networks accusing them of stealing the company's computer equipment. Non-work related matters such as romantic affairs outside of the company and drinking at a local bar seem to be inappropriate matters for discipline.

Concerning managerial policies, most HR professionals believed that the most ethical statement would be that online monitoring would be done for business-related reasons only. Such a statement not only corresponds to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines, but the international Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development guidelines concerning privacy in the workplace. There is little rationale to monitor the Internet for other than business-related reasons. Online monitoring, accordingly, for any reason, was deemed the least ethical in Table 3.

One statement, "The privacy of information provided on corporate social networks or blogs is not protected," was given a relatively high ethics rating of 3.48. On the more ethical side, companies are being honest by saying that whatever is put into their corporate social networks or blogs cannot be protected and might go out to third parties or many other places. On the less ethical side, there is a concern that the corporate social network might not be monitored sufficiently enough to protect those who enter

Table 3: Perceptions of Company Policies

Policies	Mean*	N
Employee online monitoring will be done for business-related reasons only	3.98	214
Employees who enter information into corporate social network or blogs must refrain from sharing negative statements about the company	3.64	215
The company has the right to edit any online statements made through corporate social networks or blogs	3.53	214
The privacy of information provided on corporate social networks or blogs is not protected	3.48	210
The company is not responsible for the content of statements made through its corporate social networks or blogs	2.81	214
Employees are subject to discipline for inappropriate behavior online off work hours (while off-duty)	2.67	216
Employee online monitoring will be done for any reason	2.60	215

*1= very unethical, 2 = unethical, 3 = neutral, 4 = ethical, 5 = very ethical

information to the network before it is leaked out to third parties and used inappropriately.

Conclusion

A majority of companies have some kind of online monitoring policies in the North Texas sample of Society of Human Resource Management members. With the policies, a wide variety of individuals such as human resources managers, information technology professionals, and other individuals do the monitoring. The most ethical discipline stemming from the monitoring appears to be associated with job-related discoveries about employees such as employees taking equipment from their companies. The most ethical online monitoring policy corresponds with ethical discipline in that employee monitoring will be done for business-related purposes only.

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About the Authors

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Business Briefs

2013 Unemployment Tax Rates Set

The Texas Workforce Commission's Tax Department recently announced good news for Texas employers: the state unemployment tax rates for most employers will be decreasing for 2013. The new minimum tax rate will be 0.54 percent (compared with 0.61 percent for 2012), and the new maximum tax rate will be 7.35 percent (compared with 7.58 percent in 2012). The rate for new employers (employers that are still in their first six calendar quarters of operation) remains at 2.70 percent.

IRS Announcements

- Beginning January 1, 2013, the standard mileage rates will be 56.5 per mile for business mileage: <http://www.irs.gov/uac/2013-Standard-Mileage-Rates-Up-1-Cent-per-Mile-for-Business,-Medical-and-Moving>.
- Answers to thorny questions about the Form W-4: <http://www.irs.gov/Individuals/Withholding-Compliance-Questions-&-Answers>.

Be Wary of Online Background Information

Showing how prudent it is to take online information with a grain of salt, businesses doing their own background checks using online searches need to be aware that several businesses have sprung up in the past few years that specialize in posting mug shots of people who have been arrested, then offering to take the pictures down for payment of what is often a sizable fee. In what is probably a case of regulatory action waiting to happen, some related sites posting the same pictures share the same owner and even phone number, but each site charges a separate fee for taking an individual person's photo offline. For more details, see the original story in *The Daily*: <http://www.thedaily.com/article/2012/11/19/111212-news-mugshot-shakedown/>. Since arrests do not equal convictions, employers would be well-advised to seek legal counsel before undertaking any adverse action against applicants or employees whose photos may appear on such sites. This is particularly important in light of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's new emphasis on ensuring the job-relatedness of any criminal history-related actions against employees or applicants. 🇺🇸