

ABSTRACT

Electronic Work Monitoring in Canada

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One of the most significant features about the application of information technology to production is its ability to generate vast quantities of information about the actual work process. With earlier forms of automation technology it has not been possible to systematically record and analyse the mass of fine performance details now routinely spewed forth by computerized production systems. Information on rates, times, delays, calls answered, keys pressed, messages sent, transactions entered, and so on now are generated instantly and virtually as a free by-product of current forms of automation. When analysed appropriately, this information about the performance of machines and workers can be very valuable for improved management. On the other hand, this information can provide the basis for the surveillance of individuals that is unprecedented in its scope and detail. With the spread of computerization, the proper use of this burgeoning information resource is of growing concern to managers, workers, information scientists and policy makers.

This paper explores the Canadian experience of electronic workplace monitoring in five main sections. First it defines the term and provides a historical, information theoretic, sociological and organizational background for understanding the practise. This section draws principally upon the work of Beniger, Bentham, Foucault, Wiener, Zuboff, Braverman, Simon, and Galbraith.

Next the paper surveys the range of Canadian workplaces where various forms of electronic monitoring are found. These include the well established practices in data entry, telephone operation, airline reservations, supermarket checkout, postal sorting, and transportation. Areas where the potential for monitoring is emerging with the use of such techniques as computerized PBX's, electronic mail, and automated access control are also discussed.

The third section deals with the human and organizational impacts of monitoring. These include concerns and research findings about self-concept, health and safety, stress, workplace social relations, industrial relations and their implications for organizational performance. We will also highlight the positive aspects, such as the potential for more effective decentralized management which is facilitated by electronic feedback.

The fourth section examines the attempts that been made so far in Canada to remedy the negative aspects of monitoring. These include grievance and human rights arbitrations, collective agreements, government task force studies and legislative proposals. These developments are compared to related experiences in other countries, notably the U.S. and Scandinavia.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the prospects for the future. Factors such as the trend to integrated systems, increased competitive pressures and workplace polarization are seen as encouraging the spread of monitoring, while technological turbulence, worker resistance and preservation of behavioural norms are seen as inhibiting its spread. The implications for managers, labour representatives, systems developers and policy analysts are then drawn.