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Managing Electronic Communication Among Distributed Workers

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In most organizations, there's usually a person that everyone goes to because he or she knows how to get things done. That person, who is the straw-that-stirs-the-drink of the company, is usually not the one at the top of the organization's leadership chart.

The benefits gained by allowing employees to interact in less formal ways has been shown over and over again to result in better performance, greater productivity, higher levels of loyalty to the company, and an atmosphere of trusting relationships among all levels of the firm.

Talk around the "water cooler" (or the coffee pot) has a much more beneficial impact than a way to exchange office gossip or a debate on who's going to win the Super Bowl this year. When people are able to interact outside of formal meetings and unconstrained by the confines of compartmentalized roles, they are able to share ideas, cut through the red tape of entrenched bureaucratic policies, and talk directly to those who are able to take action and simply get things done.

However, the ability to walk over to someone's workspace to ask a question or share an idea isn't always possible in a work environment saturated by email, texting, and instant messaging. These means of electronic communication are now ubiquitous in the working environment and clearly have become necessary to facilitate the efficient exchange of critical information. However, all of these electronic tools require deliberate action. In order to reach out to their colleagues, employees have to type in an email address and message, open a chat, or dial a phone number rather than simply catch someone in the hall.

Communication among those who aren't in the same physical location obviously *requires* computers and telephones. Here's the challenge: everything that is written down is (by definition) recorded and kept (possibly forever) in a company's IT databases and can fall into the hands of supervisors and fellow employees who would not have been privy to a conversation that occurred in face-to-face mode. There are both organizational and legal consequences to this new reality.

Employees who do not feel completely bound by established chain-of-command communication channels, bypass established procedures, and express their disagreements with management (all benefits of the informal organization) often generate healthy innovation. But they can also produce counter-productive distractions from the

organizational mission. This is the management dilemma. How do we balance openness and control in an era dependent on digital technology?

The monitoring of electronic communications by employers is not necessarily an infringement of personal privacy. Only one federal law specifically addresses an employer's ability to monitor employee communications, so long as the electronic monitoring is for "legitimate business practices." (The Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1986 (18 U.S.C. 2510-22) is the only federal statute that specifically addresses surveillance of employees' telephone, email, and internet usage.)

Unfortunately, the definition of "legitimate business practices" remains vague and open to multiple interpretations. Employers are required to take sufficient steps to prevent harassment and illegal behavior in the workplace. Since all written communication is discoverable for legal proceedings, the employer is on the hook for anything that is typed on a computer while their employees are on the clock.

One constructive way that employers can monitor their employees' electronic communications is to focus on productivity and accomplishments.

Impersonal monitoring of how much time employees are logged into their computer may not accurately reflect whether employees are being productive. More time on the computer may actually mean either a lack of efficiency or a tremendous effort, and there may be no way to tell the difference.

Simply counting the number of keystrokes, emails, or web sites visited by each employee is the type of monitoring that most significantly impacts employee morale and the benefits of informal organizations cited earlier (for more, see Sonny S. Ariss, "[Computer monitoring: benefits and pitfalls facing management](#)," *Information & Management*, 39:7, pp553-558, July 2002—link is to an online abstract).

Organizations that rely heavily on electronic communication must recognize and mitigate the potential for a detrimental impact on the value of informal communication. Here's what you can do:

- develop monitoring policies that focus on productivity and accomplishments;
- take advantage of opportunities for all employees (especially teleworkers) to socialize informally so that they can get to know each other better, such as having regular "on-site" meetings;
- make sure everyone in the company is aware of the monitoring policy and *why* it's in place (open a blog post on the topic that everyone to access);

- use the least intrusive means of monitoring that will still satisfy organizational goals; and
- incorporate the ideas and concerns of everyone in reviewing and revising monitoring policies.

Monitoring the formal and informal electronic communication among teleworkers may be necessary for effective supervision, but it must be balanced with the potential for diminishing innovation as well as invading personal privacy.

The performance of teleworkers depends on many factors. Many studies have found that, *ceteris paribus*, teleworking arrangements enhance individual performance as well as organizational productivity. When informal social interactions among coworkers is diminished because of electronic monitoring, their performance usually suffers.

Based on this analysis, managers should seek to implement procedures that encourage informal communications among teleworking employees. While electronic monitoring does have a valid purpose in the workplace, the rights of teleworking employees, and the impact on their productivity and morale, must also be considered.

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