

Measurement vs. Surveillance:

Ethical Uses of Data & Technology to Improve Performance & the Workplace Experience

Introduction

Though originally written as a commentary on how governmental abuses of power threaten civil liberties, George Orwell's dystopian novel, "1984" has, unfortunately, become a popular reference when discussing the modern workplace.

Growing fears around "quiet quitting" and an increasingly hybrid/remote workforce has led [more and more companies to adopt new tools and technologies](#) that closely track or monitor worker behaviors. This has understandably [raised major concerns with employees](#) about how this will impact their workplace experience, job security, and rights to privacy. In many cases, they have good reason to be concerned.

Companies that wish to thrive in the long-term, however, must also recognize the importance of being more data-driven in all of their decision-making - from **people**, to **technology**, to **real-estate**.

Fortunately, not all approaches to measuring behavior in the workplace require intrusive or unethical employee surveillance. When used ethically, thoughtfully, and transparently, these rich, new data sources equip leaders with insights that help them understand what **really** drives performance and a better employee experience across the enterprise. Still, it is right to be cautious about rolling out any workplace analytics technology, as not all tools or vendors have the needs and rights of employees or data privacy top of mind.

While clear regulation exists for the use of sensitive or personal information (*such as age, race, medical history, etc.*), not much exists around new **data generated by workplace systems or tools**. Without clear guidelines about how and when to ethically collect and analyze information on how employees work and collaborate across an organization, companies and vendors **have been left to define these terms on their own**. This has led to a wide range of approaches for quantifying, measuring, and monitoring worker behaviors - many of which are **misinformed** or **harmful** to both employees and the business.

Establishing A Data-Driven, Employee-Centric Approach



So, how can **leaders** and **change agents** within enterprises capitalize on these new work insights and opportunities **without compromising culture, trust, or retention**?



START WITH THE END IN MIND

The term “[employee surveillance](#)” implies that a company does not trust employees to be accountable without being watched. Surveillance can also send the message that workers should fear some form of punishment, rather than incentivizing or motivating them around a common goal or desired outcome. On the other hand, measurement, **when tied to specific outcomes that employees can influence**, creates opportunities for meaningful engagement and motivation.

Before collecting or analyzing *any* employee data, it is critical to have **well-defined goals** that align with company values, that leaders can proudly speak about, and that employees can confidently get invested in. Rather than monitoring behaviors to “keep workers in line” or “hold employees accountable”, companies must **prioritize and lead with positive use-cases** that benefit people as much as performance. Examples of these use cases can include things like:

- Driving **more cross-team collaboration** to break down silos
- Understanding **which groups benefit from working together** to inform effective hybrid/remote work strategies
- Identifying groups **at risk of burnout or attrition** to improve employee retention.

Defining and communicating a clear purpose helps prevent unfavorable outcomes such as **data misinterpretation or misuse**, heightened **employee distrust**, and detrimental **PR or legal issues**. This is equally important when selecting vendors and partners, which will also be discussed in this paper.



PRIVACY COMES FIRST



Protecting employees at all stages of data collection and analysis **is a key differentiator between measurement and surveillance**. Though there are certain use-cases that may benefit from looking at individual behaviors, they are rarely worth the potential risk of eroding employee trust or the misuse of personally identifiable data in a way that negatively impacts the entire organization.

Not only does delivering insight at the individual level put organizations at a higher risk of lawsuits and employee pushback, these granular insights are not the best way to measure productivity and engagement. It has been scientifically proven that looking at how groups work is much more informative and impactful on performance and other desired outcomes, like retention. Looking at a group's behavioral trends rather than an individual's provides just as much insight, can be acted upon just as easily, and help drive positive changes without singling out individuals or damaging the organization's culture.



TRANSPARENCY & COMMUNICATION

Once an organization has selected ethical use cases for measurement, it's highly important to **share this information with all levels of the organization** – from executives, to managers, to individual contributors- clearly and thoughtfully.

Proactively offering specifics and transparency about what's being measured, why, how, and what the data will be used for, helps preserve trust and inspire positive action in response to these insights when the time comes.

By opening two-way lines of communication and prompting discussions early, employees can feel empowered to speak up and provide important input or feedback, in case the organization has missed important contexts that should inform their strategy.



THERE'S NO SINGLE "SILVER BULLET" SOLUTION

Though quantitative insight into work behaviors and patterns can be hugely insightful, it is not a silver bullet. When combined with quantitative sources like workplace analytics, subjective insights, such as feedback surveys, interviews, or observation also provide critical information and contexts. These data sources and workforce sentiments should be taken into consideration when designing an ethical and effective measurement strategy for driving both organizational effectiveness and organizational health. Implementing an approach that factors in the complexities of the modern workplace and allows for subjective and contextual inputs also helps protect against negative perceptions of surveillance and incomplete or inaccurate interpretation.



CHOOSING PARTNERS & VENDORS



In a constantly-evolving and mostly unregulated industry, it's critical for enterprises to do plenty of due diligence and research when designing workplace measurement strategies. Some organizations attempt to conduct workplace analytics internally on their own, without the help of an outside vendor, which can often miss important outside perspectives, risk important ethical considerations being overlooked, and become overly complicated.

When searching for the right partner to aid your strategy, it's important to prioritize vendors that are specialized experts in their field and use trusted, proven methodologies **backed by research and proven business cases**. When leveraged as part of an overall measurement strategy, vendors can serve as strategic advisors, point out blindspots, and provide critical checks-and-balances that help protect employees, prevent bias, and avoid ethical missteps. Unfortunately, however, there are also many unqualified and blatantly harmful vendors in the space, who make untested claims to measure "productivity," without considering important nuances or cultural repercussions.

When selecting a vendor, every organization should check and extensively vet the company's credentials, how and what workplace data is measured, and whether they are committed to the principles of ethical workplace measurement.

Be a Top Employer, Not “Big Brother”

It's inevitable that new workplace data sources and methods for understanding and measuring will continue to emerge and evolve at lightning speed. When used thoughtfully, ethically, and with necessary checks-and-balances, this rich data can serve as a powerful tool and secret weapon for maintaining and retaining a high-performing workforce in the new world of work. If adopted carelessly and/or without an eye for ethics, employee privacy, and the nuances of how “productivity” is defined, employers risk severely damaging their reputations and their bottom-lines. In the long term, the risk is worth the reward for organizations who choose to **embrace new data in the right way**. To do this, and ensure a measurement strategy does not become surveillance or spyware, every organization and leader should reflect on the following questions:

- What positive and ethical use-cases will you collect and measure data for?
- How will you involve employees and account for their feedback and context?
- Which vendors will you partner with, and what are their credentials?
- How can this be done while protecting culture & employees' rights to privacy?

By dedicating ongoing attention to these important considerations while embracing more data about work, leaders can inform and implement the right decisions with more speed and certainty than ever before.



Looking for proven, data-driven solutions that help inform better decisions and protect employees *by design*?

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