

EYES ON YOU

High-tech monitoring means firms know when workers break rules that used to be bent. How strictly should “gray zones” be enforced?

By David Berreby





THE PROBLEM

Companies can use an array of tech devices to know when workers are breaking even "soft" rules.

WHY IT MATTERS

Cracking down too much can decrease employee morale and organizational efficiency.

THE SOLUTION

Be more transparent about what behaviors are being tracked.



Surveillance cameras.

Keyboard stroke counters. Voice analysis algorithms. Employee badges with motion sensors, GPS, and Bluetooth. Body cams. Customers ever ready to whip out a smartphone and start recording. Thanks to digital technology, workers today are the most scrutinized humans who've ever lived.

Researchers from Boston University realized how far it had gone when a few years ago they set out to study the effects of 21st-century surveillance on security screeners at a large airport. The issue? Finding anywhere at the airport that was not monitored. "We finally found space in a nearby hotel," says Michel Anteby, a professor of organizational behavior at Boston University's Questrom School of Business, who led the research.

It's easy to imagine that surveillance improves productivity and consistency even if employees grumble. But there is a possible downside of monitoring, and it has received relatively little attention. More scrutiny means more adherence to formal rules in situations that, until recently, were governed by workers' own judgment and the informal "social contracts" among people in an organization.

"Surveillance tends to rigidify the social contract," Anteby says, "because it forces things to be made explicit and visible, and tries to shed light on every aspect of daily operations." At first glance, many leaders might think, *Great! That's the point of the rules.* But research doesn't back up that view. In fact, skirting and even violating an organization's official regulations has more benefits than leaders are prepared to admit—in public, at least.



the commitment to official rules, in practice workers and often managers feel they're more effective when rules are selectively violated. Many organizations harbor what Anteby calls "moral gray zones"—"areas at work in

A recent story in the online magazine *Slate* described the incident. Katie Miller, a police officer in Washington, DC, stopped a Subaru that had just run a red light. Inside was a mother with an infant strapped into a car seat behind her. Reluctantly, she produced her license. It had expired two years earlier. "I was supposed to arrest her," wrote Miller of the encounter. But she looked at the grocery bags on the floor and then the wide-eyed child, red and blue lights splashing across his hairless head.

"Violating protocol," she wrote. "I asked the woman to park the car and call a friend to pick her up."

All of which might have been a good call—but not one Miller could make today. Washington police now wear body cameras. After the department adopted this tech, she writes, "seemingly overnight, keeping my job meant doing everything by the book." She left the force in 2018.

Research suggests that Miller's experience isn't unique in policing. For example, a 2017 experiment conducted by the criminologist Anthony A. Braga of Northeastern University found that Las Vegas police officers who wore body cameras wrote more tickets, and made more arrests, than their colleagues who didn't wear cams.

What is true of police departments is true of many, if not most, organizations: whatever

which workers and their supervisors together engage in practices that are officially forbidden, yet tolerated by the organization."

Mail carriers going home early after their deliveries are complete; flight attendants helping themselves to an alcoholic pick-me-up from a completed flight's stock; nurses taking aspirin from the hospital supply shelf; waiters removing some items from a customer's paid bill and distributing the money among themselves; garment workers making and selling clothes made on the company's time with leftover materials—these are all examples of "gray zones" studied by management scholars. Good leaders "are well aware of the benefits," Anteby says. Officially, of course, they don't admit it.

Some years ago, when Anteby was beginning research on a long-standing gray zone at a large French aeronautics plant, he recalls, "the manager of that plant told me he would be glad to help me out. But I should not tell anyone I met him." (For obvious reasons, the plant, extensively described in Anteby's book *Moral Gray Zones*, is never identified.)

For decades that factory's skilled workers—blacksmiths, welders, fitters, and electricians—made ashtrays, scale models, lamps, window frames, sculptures, and other objects out of scrap metal at work, using the same tools they used for their official workload. The practice gave those workers a sense that they and their skills were respected, reaffirming their identities as a breed apart from both the

AN ARMS RACE IN TRACKING

Technology that eliminates long-standing gray zones is seldom welcome by the workers it affects. A few examples of systems and the resistance they elicit:

Employee tracking software on smartphones



In many jurisdictions, it is legal for an employer-issued phone to contain software that allows the employer to track a worker. Some employees deal with this by shutting down their phones when not at work when possible. Others have taken to the courts. A sales executive at a money-transfer firm, for example, sued after being fired for removing a tracking app from her company-issued phone. She argued she was being treated like parolees required to wear ankle bracelets. The 2015 suit eventually was settled out of court.

Office screen and keyboard trackers



Software packages like Worksnaps and Kickidler now let employers count keystrokes and rate of typing, and see what is appearing on employees' screens. Employers have an obvious incentive to monitor computer behavior, given the widespread use of computers for personal shopping

or, worse, pornography watching. Yet there is little doubt that employees resist the implicit message of this software: that they can't be trusted. The result has been an arms race of sorts between makers of tracking software, who strive to capture fakery, and hackers, who make software to fool the monitors.

Police officer body cameras



Research suggests that body cameras reduce complaints about officers' use of force. They also reduce cops' ability to use their judgment about when and how to enforce laws. Officers have been known to resist by "forgetting" to turn on body cams or reporting that a device malfunctioned.

GPS and monitoring of truckers



Once "the knights of the road," to use their own description, long-haul truck drivers today cannot pick up hitchhikers or make unexpected detours. They're monitored by cameras, GPS trackers, and devices that

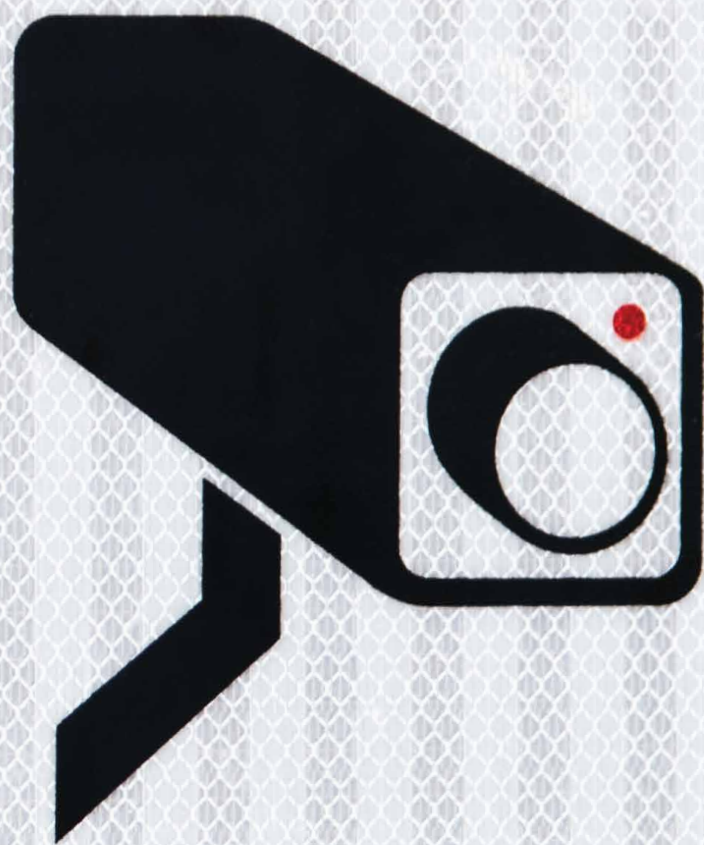
trigger cameras whenever they brake forcefully, among many other devices. Drivers have been discovered putting tinfoil over their GPS receivers, or making sure logging devices meet with unfortunate "accidents," and working around device specs. Similarly, employees whose employers monitor their wellness habits with Fitbits have discovered that they can appear very active indeed—by attaching the devices to pets.

Airport monitoring of security screeners



TSA employees, who feel they are intensely watched by supervisors and the public at all times, respond with strategies including taking extra time traveling from one part of the airport to another, extending their breaks, and keeping their expressions blank. "You learn to work under the umbrella," one employee told Anteby. Ironically, Anteby and Curtis K. Chan of Boston College wrote in a recent paper in *Organization Science*, employees' resistance to surveillance prompted management to install more surveillance equipment.

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white-collar staff and the unskilled laborers at the plant, Anteby says.

Many leaders have a gut feeling that such a practice must be a slippery slope toward widespread theft, slacking, and other malfeasances. Yet long-standing gray zones, Anteby says, are not lawless. On the contrary, participating workers police the zone with unwritten rules—norms of conduct that employees understand as ethical obligations. Workers at the French plant he studied, he says, would

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never create so-called “homers” from supplies intended for production, for instance, and they disapproved of making them too visible in their workspace or giving them to people outside the factory community.

Having a soft touch on rules has another benefit: it confirms workers in their identity as special people, admitted into an exclusive circle because of their hard work, skills, and experience. A manager who tolerates a gray zone is seen as affirming this identity, and conveying respect for the skills and expertise of the workers involved. “Smart factory managers were the ones who would allow this to happen,” Anteby says. “They were well aware of the benefits that they could get from these localized leniency systems.”

Paradoxical as it may seem, the practice of managers “looking the other way” can give them more control over employees, too. After all, Anteby notes, workers who value the informal leniency will be highly motivated to make sure it isn’t withdrawn.

OF course, tolerating moral gray zones can spark criticism that relying on norms and traditions rather than explicit rules actually gives managers too much power. Managing by a tolerance of rule-breaking, argues the novelist Judith Merkle, bears “a close family resemblance to the working practices of Stalinism.” Rules whose enforcement is unpredictable, she argues, mark “the first step in the destruction of the rule of law, and, in the long run, leads to the introduction of de facto totalitarianism.”

Given these concerns and the ever-extending reach of monitoring technology, you might expect that gray zones and wiggle room will continue to shrink as the 21st century advances. But Anteby does not.

“I think people will move this activity to outside the workplace,” he says. “I suspect it’s not a disappearance we’ll see but a smart displacement of gray zones.” Future gray zones might be in places that we don’t expect, like Facebook pages, private

homes, and other real and virtual spaces that aren’t controlled by the employees’ organization. After all, he notes, the hotel in which he interviewed the airport workers about surveillance likely had security cameras—but they weren’t connected to the airport’s monitoring systems. So employees there felt safe about voicing their complaints to the researchers.

Ultimately, it’s also possible that workers will invent new ways to create gray zones even as they’re being monitored, communicating in ways surveillance can’t pick up. Miller, the former police officer, recounts how she once interrupted a mother who had called 911 on her son. Miller, pointing to the camera on her chest, said, “If you’re about to report a crime, we have a duty to apply for a warrant for his arrest.” The mother, not actually wanting her to be child arrested, nodded and suppressed what she had planned to say, understanding the need for discretion. “We stood looking at one another for a moment—the two of us, skirting a system,” says Miller. ▀