



ALL EYES ON YOU

DEFINING THE FINE LINE BETWEEN
AN ELECTRONIC SWEATSHOP
AND A TECHNOLOGICAL UTOPIA

Most employees aren't encouraged by the idea that their boss is constantly watching them, but that doesn't deter employers' enthusiasm for monitoring devices. How can both sides feel secure that their interests are protected?

BY ANDIE BURJEK

In August 2017, Patrick McMullan and more than 50 of his employees had microchips inserted in their fingers live on NBC's "Today Show." McMullan, the president of Three Square Market, a Wisconsin-based company that sells self-service break room vending machines, said it was one of the most exhilarating and nerve-wracking experiences of his life.

An employee who was to be chipped approached him 10 minutes before he was going on air and asked, "Should I do it today or not?" McMullan said "No," to the employee's surprise.

"If you're asking me, it means you're not certain about it," he said. "And the answer is 'No' until you can be at peace that it's something you want to do."

Three Square Market received a lot of media attention after its chip party — both negative and positive, McMullan said — but in the past year Three Square proved that it's possible to be forward-thinking with technology while also contemplating and respecting employees' privacy.

"What that has done is inspired our employees to be far more innovative in finding solutions," he said. "It's helped all of our businesses in the past year. We've had a phenomenal 12 months."

As more monitoring devices — phone or video recorders, wristbands, microchips, and wireless sensors that measure employees' brain waves — are developed, and as these tools become more powerful, there's greater potential for invading employees' privacy.

Perceptions toward monitoring devices depend on what type of analysis is being done — an issue that becomes more complex as devices with elaborate capabilities enter the market, said Laurel McNall, associate professor at The College at

Brockport, State University of New York. Her research interests revolve around employee attitudes, specifically around perceptions of fairness in the workplace.

"I do think there is a danger of setting up an electronic sweatshop," McNall said.

What once appeared a dystopian, futuristic theory is a reality, at least from a technology perspective.

It would be naive to believe that companies will curb their use of monitoring devices that they think will improve business. But it would also be naive to assume that there aren't organizations or managers that would take advantage of surveillance technology — and the lack of oversight — and cross a line when monitoring employees. In many cases workers are stuck in the middle, feeling as if they don't have a choice in the matter or any sense of privacy at work.

As employers face the scattered legal landscape of employee monitoring and the often-skeptical reaction of their employees — Three Square Market workers notwithstanding — they must tread carefully and respectfully to find success.

Employee Comfort Levels Toward Monitoring

Most employees find it unacceptable to monitor personal, non-work-related activities, according to a 2018 survey conducted by the HR Metrics & Analytics Summit, "Workplace Privacy & Protection: Is Your Employer Watching Your Every Move?" It's inappropriate to monitor physical movements around the workplace, for example through wearable technology such as a Fitbit, said 57 percent of employee respondents, while 56 percent said it's inappropriate to monitor personal interactions with these devices.