BUSINESS NEWS LESSONS

Watching your workers–Intermediate Worksheet

1 Warmer

a. **Make a list of five words you associate with the verb *monitor*.**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

b. **Consider an industry where you would expect to see their staff heavily monitored. Write a brief paragraph outlining the kinds of technologies that might be used to monitor them.**

2 Key words

a. **Find the key words and phrases in the article that match the definitions below. Use the section numbers to help you.**

1. obeying a rule or law, or doing what someone asks you to do (1) _____

2. a process by which a disease spreads from one person to another (3) _____

3. to cause something to happen or be done (3) _____

4. very great or extreme (4) _____

5. becoming infected with a disease (5) _____

6. the ability to work well and produce good results in the most effective way (6) _____

7. the rate at which goods are produced, especially in relation to the time, money, and workers

    needed to produce them (7) _____

8. to make you want to do or to have something, especially something that is not good for you

    (10) _____

9. involving all the members of a group (11) _____

10. to try to reach an agreement by discussing something in a formal way, especially in a business or

    political situation (11) _____

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Workplace surveillance may hurt us more than it helps

MANY EMPLOYERS ARE MONITORING STAFF, SOME DECIDING 'WHO'S A SUPERSTAR AND WHO'S SLACKING OFF'

BY SARAH O'CONNOR

1 You can't fault Amazon's timing. In the middle of a global pandemic, the online retailer has launched a new workplace surveillance tool that could help to slow Covid's spread. Called AWS Panorama, it uses computer vision technology to analyse footage from security cameras in workplaces. It can detect when employees are not complying with social distancing rules, for example.

2 Amazon, which plans to sell the tool to other employers, says it can improve workplace safety in other ways, too. "Are people walking in spaces where they shouldn't be? Is there an oil spill? Are they not wearing hard hats? These are realworld problems," a senior executive told the FT.

3 It's easy to see how the technology could help in the fight against Covid-19, since workplaces are a major source of transmission. It could reveal pinch points in factories where social distancing isn't possible, for instance, which might prompt companies to redesign work processes. But, like any tool, the outcomes will depend on the people who wield it.

4 Having read a lot of corporate safety incident reports over the years, I'm struck by how often CCTV footage is used to blame the worker who was hurt. In a recent example from a British meat factory (an industry where work pressures are often intense), a man fractured his hand when running to fetch a metal plate. "This is a behavioural safety issue [because he shouldn't have run] and he will be disciplined upon his return," the company wrote in the report to the UK's health and safety regulator. There was no mention of why he felt the need to run in the first place.

5 In this context, it's not hard to imagine a future scenario where workers are blamed for contracting Covid-19, possibly with implications for their sick pay, by employers unwilling to consider their own role and responsibilities.

6 There is also the possibility of mission creep. A testimonial on the AWS Panorama website from guitar-maker Fender enthused: "We can track how long it takes for an associate to complete each task in the assembly of a guitar so that we're able to optimise efficiency and track key metrics." The comment has now been deleted from the site.

7 Many employers are exploring how to use technological surveillance to drive productivity and measure performance. In 2018, the research company Gartner surveyed 239 big companies and found more than half were using non-traditional monitoring techniques, up from 30 per cent in 2015. Gartner defines monitoring as things such as "analysing the text of emails and social-media messages, scrutinising who's meeting with whom, gathering biometric data and understanding how employees are utilising their workspace".

8 Walmart, the US retailer, has filed a patent for a system of sound sensors placed near cashiers which could "determine a performance metric for the employee based on the audio data". In the white-collar world, an array of companies are selling software that enables employers to monitor what workers do on their computers. Time Doctor, for instance, will take regular screenshots of each employee's screen, measure their breaks and send nudges if they stray on to nonwork related sites. Supervisors are given dashboards that show "who's a superstar and who's slacking off".

9 But you don't have to be a slacker to recoil at the idea of constant monitoring. Humans are hard-wired to feel uncomfortable being watched all the time, especially when under pressure to meet stretching targets. "It makes me afraid, physically and mentally exhausted," Hibaq Mohamed, an Amazon warehouse worker, told researchers at the Open Markets Institute of the monitoring at work.

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10 A body of research suggests jobs that combine high demands (concentration requirements, workload, time pressure) and low control (discretion to make decisions and schedule one's own work) are ruinous for human health. Our metabolic, cardiovascular and neuroendocrine systems produce short-term responses to stressful situations, but when the stress is chronic, it can damage our bodies or tempt us to self-medicate. One study in the US, published last year, found that people in high-demand jobs with low control were more likely to die than people in high-demand jobs with high control.

11 Workplace surveillance should be subject to regulatory oversight and ideally collective bargaining, since individuals will be better placed to negotiate the details en masse. It would be a dispiriting irony if technology brought in to protect our health in a pandemic made us sicker in the end.

FT

Sarah O'Connor, 11 January 2021
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3 **Understanding the article**

a. **In pairs, read the statements below and decide if they are True (T) or False (F) according to the text. Correct the false statements.**

1. Amazon has been creating software that can be used to monitor staff and ensure that they are not contributing to the spread of a virus.   T / F

2. Businesses could use monitoring technology to change their work processes and improve them to fight the virus.   T / F

3. Companies might use technology to blame workers for hurting themselves at work and for spreading the virus.   T / F

4. A company that produces guitars uses technology to track which colours are the most popular.   T / F

5. Many employees want to explore the ways in which monitoring tools can drive productivity and performance.   T / F

6. Walmart plans to listen to their staff and find out how they interact with customers to rate their professional performance.   T / F

7. Some businesses are monitoring staff working from home by giving them a digital clock that measures their breaks.   T / F

8. Workers feel happy and excited when they are under pressure to meet targets and they are being watched all the time.   T / F

9. People in demanding jobs that allow them to have a lot of control are healthier than those who are in jobs with less control.   T / F

10. There needs to be some formal process for checking how employers are monitoring their staff.   T / F

4 **Business language – Phrases and phrasal verbs**

a. **Match the words to make phrases and phrasal verbs from the article. Then check your answers in the article.**

1. fight	a. on
2. depend	b. instance
3. struck	c. pressure
4. for	d. by
5. based	e. from
6. under	f. against
7. up	g. than
8. more	h. on

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b. **Write the phrases and phrasal verbs next to the definitions.**

1. increased from a previous number or measurement _____

2. using particular ideas or facts to make a decision _____

3. to be determined or decided by something _____

4. saying that the actual number or amount is larger than another amount _____

5. for example _____

6. to struggle or disagree with someone or something _____

7. to take notice of something that had a powerful effect on you _____

8. in a state of stress and anxiety because of having too much to do _____

c. **Complete the statements with the correct phrase or phrasal verb.**

1. Staff working in supermarkets while we fight the virus are _____ to work longer hours than staff in any other industries.

2. Employee bonuses should be _____ good performance and hard workers should be guaranteed a bonus every year.

d. **Discuss the statements in pairs. Do you agree with them or do you have a different opinion?**

5 **Business Language – Compound nouns**

a. **Complete the sentences using the compound nouns.**

| incident reports | security cameras | work processes |

1. The shop owner was aware that thieves were using a window in the back of the building to access the stock room, so he installed several _____ that monitored the window, the corridor and the stock room.

2. He was impressed with her professional history, which demonstrated experience in developing _____ and managing a large team.

3. Dominique explains that if an injury is sustained at work, employees must fill out _____, even if it the injury is minor and they do not think it is necessary.

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6 **Discussion questions**

a. **Read and discuss the questions with your group.**

• Which monitoring tool do you think is likely to make workers most uncomfortable? Why?

• How can staff monitoring negatively affect the employer and employee relationship?

• How important is the use of technology in fighting the virus?

7 **Wider business theme – identifying technological solutions**

a. **Work in groups of three. Discuss how monitoring technology could be used to improve the physical activity of workers in offices.**

• Consider different types of physical activity that people could do during the day at work.

• Consider which types you could encourage people to do with the use of technology.

• Think about the cheapest options that would appeal to a lot of different businesses.

• Come to a group decision about which technology you think would be the most successful.

b. **Nominate a student to represent the group. The student should describe the technology to the rest of the class, explaining how it will encourage workers to get moving and why you think it will be successful.**

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