25 Feb 2020 - **Ed Houghton, Head of Research and Thought Leadership**

Surveillance in the 'data-driven' workplace: is this the new norm?

As Barclays hits the headlines for rolling out surveillance software to monitor employees, how can the people profession use its expertise to inform the application of workplace technology?

News that some organisations are using software to monitor an individual's working habits has shocked many. However, it's the application of new workplace technology, not technology itself, which is likely to create problems in organisations. There is an obvious role for an empowered people profession to advise and lead in the collection of people data, and to understand the case for and against using different forms of technology in the workplace.

The news that Barclays has rolled out software to both support and monitor an individual's use of their workplace computers has raised many eyebrows. The pilot of new technology was originally designed to understand whether data on computer usage could help to promote more productive work practices, but a whistleblower highlighted concerns over their high levels of stress and anxiety working in these new conditions. Workplace technologies are reshaping the debate on monitoring and surveillance and are now raising important questions about productivity, trust and data in the modern world of work. These questions are all relevant to the people profession.

Should workplaces be monitoring the workforce?

First, it's important to note that the Data Protection Act does not prevent employers from monitoring employees. There are many reasons why employees might expect to be monitored in the workplace; for example, monitoring can help to safeguard employees working in hazardous or dangerous conditions or may be used to protect property or stock. However, employees are entitled to some privacy at work, so it is therefore critical that employers tell employees about monitoring and why it is happening.

Second, there are many potential benefits to collecting and using people data, some of which may be collected through monitoring technology. People data can be used to quantify workplace practices to improve both productivity and employee well-being. Many technologies collect people data in aggregate and provide an overview of team-level performance.

However, people professionals shouldn't rush into adopting new technologies without careful consideration. Data is only useful when used appropriately, and to solve a well-articulated and understood problem. An over-reliance on data can lead to blinkered decision-making – particularly when incomplete or error-strewn data sets are involved. This is part of the reason why the profession must look to be evidence-based, to draw on multiple sources of good-quality evidence (some of which may be internal data) to inform practices. Using multiple forms of evidence effectively can help to alleviate the possible risks that harm decision-making.

It's critical that organisations take stock of their current practices and work closely with their employees to explore and establish the case for workplace monitoring and surveillance. And, even if the case is clear for surveillance, organisations should look to explore if other workplace practices could be better suited. For example, productivity may be better enhanced through improved people management practices and performance management. More data and more surveillance may not necessarily be the answer.

The impact of surveillance on the workforce

Before implementing technology, it's important to understand how it is likely to shape workplace practices both positively and negatively. Case studies show that there are risks that must be considered upfront. For example, organisations such as Amazon use monitoring technology in their warehouses to track workers to try and improve the productivity and efficiency of their operations, but as well as rewarding those who perform well, the threat of dismissal due to low measured productivity and performance is a very real concern for many workers.

It is perhaps surprising that for a hugely topical area, there are only a small number of rigorous academic studies that describe how surveillance impacts individual workers. Some simple academic studies highlight the negative impact surveillance has on well-being, but interestingly show that empowerment may act as a buffer against the impact of high levels of surveillance. Others highlight the impact of workplace surveillance on trust. Studies have shown that electronic monitoring and surveillance can negatively impact trust in management, specifically for employees in manual, highly standardised roles. There is, however, a real need for more research on this important topic.

It's difficult to tell whether technology-enabled surveillance is happening on a large scale, or whether recent stories are isolated incidents. However, we do know that employees

<u>believe it to be common</u>. Over half of UK workers (56%) believe that it is likely that they are being monitored at work, with younger workers believing it is more likely to be happening to them. As for future expectations, well over two-thirds (70%) expect that it is likely to become more common in the future. This is a challenge that the people profession must pay attention to as it is clearly on the minds of many workers today.

The role of the people profession

Worryingly, the people profession does appear to be left out of workplace technology discussion. <u>CIPD research</u> highlights that HR is the function least likely to be involved in decisions relating to the investments into AI and automation in the workplace (55%). Conversations relating to surveillance may suffer the same fate, meaning that discussions will be led by IT, R&D or operations functions – to the obvious detriment of workplace outcomes.

The people profession must play a more central role in the decision-making process and use its expertise to inform monitoring and surveillance in the workplace. While the role of the function will differ in each case, people professionals should expect to draw on their knowledge of concepts such as job quality, employee relations and culture. It's an exciting agenda in which the profession can lead debate and share their expertise, and one which should invigorate many people professionals to create real impact through their work.

New technologies offer much potential to improve workplace practices, enhance productivity and performance, and create better quality jobs. But technologies alone, including surveillance and monitoring technology, are unlikely to create negative or positive outcomes. Instead, impact is created at the implementation stage. It is for this reason that the people profession must lead workplace technology discussions and play a central role at every stage of the process.