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Americans Wary of Big Brother AI Watching in the Workplace

By Richard Vanderford

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Americans are largely leery of artificial intelligence peering over their shoulder at the workplace to watch for bad behavior, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, though only a fraction think AI will have a major impact on them personally.

AI has been used for years in technologies that can monitor what employees do at work, including surveillance systems that can try to see if retail employees are stealing, software that scrutinizes truck drivers for bad behavior, and plug-ins for email and chat applications that can flag foul language or fraud in offices.

According to the Pew survey released Thursday, Americans overwhelmingly oppose AI tracking their movements at work, for example—61% are against it, while 15% are in favor—or recording exactly what they are doing on their computers. About twice as many survey respondents opposed computer monitoring as favored it in Pew’s survey, which was conducted in December and drew on the opinions of about 11,000 U.S. adults. In a striking generational gap, according to the survey, 64% of people ages 18 to 29 opposed the use of AI to track what people are doing on their work computers, compared with 38% of people 65 and older.

Research has shown that most Americans don’t know much about the extent to which AI is being used to collect and monitor information, said Monica Anderson, an associate director at Pew Research and a lead author of the report.

“There’s a healthy amount of skepticism and concern, but also a lack of knowledge and awareness,” Ms. Anderson said. “It’s just not something that is readily known among the general public.”

Though most respondents think AI will have a major impact on U.S. workplaces, only about a quarter think it will affect them personally. “People are more likely to think that other people’s jobs will be disrupted versus their own,” she said.

Many older technologies have long given employers the power to check up on their workers, from keylogging software in laptops to the simple surveillance camera. AI, though, can allow employers to quickly sift through reams of data as they hunt for low-productivity workers or misconduct.

AI—in particular the generative variety that can create images and words near instantaneously from a simple prompt—has drawn much attention, with some observers raising concerns about the increasingly uncanny ability of the technology to mimic human work. A group of AI experts in March called for a moratorium of six months or longer on AI development to give the industry time to set safety standards for AI design and address potential harms of the riskiest technologies.

A survey from the consulting firm Gartner Inc. released in 2019 showed that more than half of large corporations were doing some type of nontraditional employee monitoring, while research from consulting firm Accenture PLC released that same year said 62% of organizations were using some kind of new technology to collect data on people and their work. Those surveys didn’t break down what kind of monitoring the businesses were doing.

Pew’s more recent research showed most respondents opposed many of the uses of AI-powered surveillance. A slim majority of respondents with an opinion, though, favored monitoring workers’

driving behavior as they made trips for the company. For each type of use, between 20% to 30% of respondents weren't sure how they felt.

Several companies offer tools to monitor whether office workers are secretly sending work emails to questionable recipients. Some can sort through reams of chats to ferret out evidence of potentially inappropriate behavior—including simple requests to move a conversation offline. McNicholas is the co-leader of the data, privacy & cybersecurity practice at law firm Ropes & Gray

Companies can, for example, monitor communications for signs of abusive or harassing language, said Ed McNicholas, a partner at law firm Ropes & Gray LLP who specializes in technology and privacy issues. Mr. McNicholas said that the rules concerning AI use in the workplace can differ by jurisdiction because of privacy laws, which tend to be more stringent in the European Union than in most of the U.S.

Businesses using AI face a sometimes tricky task of applying the technology to tackle undesirable behavior without being seen as overly intrusive. AI can, though, in theory offer a less intrusive way for companies to check in on workers, leaving most of the monitoring work to software in the background, Mr. McNicholas said.

“It could expand the capacity to do surveillance in a more respectful way that is sensitive to worker privacy, or it could expand the capacity to do surveillance in a way that is creepy,” he said.

Omer Tene, a lawyer and senior fellow at the Future of Privacy Forum, a data privacy think tank, said there isn't a scientific test for how businesses can avoid being creepy—it's more of a “gut check.”

“You don't need your lawyer for it,” he said. “Ask your teammates, kids.”

In addition to the concern from human beings, AI technologies themselves are aware of the issue—or at least one is.

Asked for comment, the popular text-generating AI called ChatGPT said: “Feeling nervous about your company's use of AI to monitor employee communications and behavior is a valid concern. Employee monitoring, including the use of AI, can raise privacy, ethical and legal considerations that can impact employee trust and morale.”