DO OFFICE WORKERS RESIST INTENSIVE MONITORING PROCEDURES?

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Abstract

Highly publicized employee complaints indicate that office workers may be seriously dissatisfied with computerized monitoring procedures. The results of the study described here, however, suggest that this may not be the case. After situating the discussion within the historical development of external control methods, the article outlines study findings and presents reasons employees may not resist this form of labor process control.

Introduction

External control, through which someone or something other than the worker determines the pace of job tasks and evaluates results, is characteristic of the capitalist work process. It has taken new and expanded forms over the years. Most recently computerized technology in the office is being used to record the daily activities of employees. Because of widespread labor complaints, unions have expected employees to resist these intensive monitoring procedures. The results of the study described in the following pages, however, suggest that this will not necessarily be the case.

External Control and The Development of Capitalism

External control did not characterize work prior to the development of capitalism. Since the late 1700's, however, it has been given ever more intense forms of expression, culminating today with the use of computer systems in the growing service sector.

Before capitalism, guild members of the Middle Ages controlled their own production processes. The craftsman could envision in the mind's eye the steps necessary to produce, for example, a tool or wagon. These laborers determined for themselves how much

would be produced and when.

As capitalism developed, however, these methods failed to suit the purposes of the emerging entrepreneur. New owners moved swiftly to locate production under one roof: the factory. There the employer could determine the pace of production and quantities produced.

In the early part of the 20th century in the U.S., firms were still relatively small, and control over work remained largely in the hands of the employer. But as markets expanded, businesses grew, and a new cadre of bosses emerged to take over monitoring: supervisors.

The development of the assembly line, used in manufacturing, brought with it yet another form of control: technology. The assembly line could be set at whatever pace was most desired by the supervisor or owner. 1

During the 1920's, Taylorism further entrenched and expanded the domain of external control. Frederick Winslow Taylor set forth principles, adopted by management, which separated mental work from manual. According to Taylor's principles, "The labor process is to be rendered independent

of craft, tradition and the worker's knowledge." 2 And, "All possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning and laying out department." 3 Taylor's methods stripped employees of conceptual activity. They were left with responsibility for only fragmented pieces of the production process, tasks which they repeated over and over again.

Taylor's system dominated first in manufacturing; the office was considered for a time the center of mental activity while manual work took place in the factory. But eventually conceptual activity was reduced among office workers as well, as thought, judgment and planning centered in smaller and smaller groups within the firm. This process has been described in the following way.

The progressive elimination of thought from the work of the office worker thus takes the form first, of reducing mental labor to a repetitious performance of the same small set of functions. The work is still performed in the brain, but the brain is used as the equivalent of the hand of the detail worker in production, grasping and releasing a single piece of 'data' over and over again. The next step is the elimination of the thought process completely - or at least insofar as it is ever removed from human labor - and the increase of clerical categories in which nothing but manual labor is performed.

In the 1980's, microelectronic technology is now being used to complement and replace earlier control methods in the office. New computerized systems can be programmed to check, for example, the number of insurance claims processed or phone calls answered, and how long each task takes.

Worker Unrest

In recent years, study results, popular accounts and the media have highlighted employee dissatisfaction with the intensive monitoring procedures now used in the office. 5 The following statement from the Union Times, the newsletter of the New York Times Unit of the Newspaper Guild of New York, convincingly describes the sources of worker frustration.

A new big brother...system in the Classified Department on the sixth floor has thrown the department into confusion and anger...employees are required to press buttons that serve as an electronic bird-dog from the time they arrive in the morning until they depart at night. If an ad-taker has to look in the dictionary, punch one button. Go to the toilet, punch a button. Stand up to stretch, punch a button. If there is a lapse of more than five minutes between phone calls, a signal automatically flashes on a management terminal. A supervisor is then dispatched to find out why the next phone call has not been initiated. The management seeks a maximum lapse between calls of 10 seconds, and there is a warning flash even at ten seconds. At the end of each day a complete printout is available on the movements of each employee for every second of the day...6

On June 23, 1987, the popular television program Nightline centered on office workers facing constant surveillance by managers and supervisors. Employees interviewed said they believe such monitoring violates privacy, since supervisors may listen even to personal conversations between workers.

Unions have anticipated a rise in membership from among these office workers. "As office work becomes more like factory work...office workers will seek unionization for the same reasons factory workers have."7

In spite of these expectations and

the complaints which precipitate them, it is possible that office workers may, instead, be learning to accept rigid forms of monitoring. In a large national insurance firm centered in New York City, this seems to be happening.

The Sample

Seventy-seven employees from the five departments of the firm responsible for the greatest amount of visual display terminal, or VDT, activity, and filling six different clerical positions, participated in the study. Word processors from the Word Processing Center, who made up approximately nine percent of the study, were responsible for typing memos, letters and reports. Employees from a Group Claims Department, fourteen percent of the participants, paid or denied payment of claims.

The Policy Owner Services department (POS) provided any servicing of clients' policies which was requested. Tasks included surrenders---policy cancellations---or reinstatements. Entry level POS employees handled the simplest tasks while those at the top of the area's job ladder took care of the more complicated procedures. POS workers made up a little less than two-thirds of the study. The remaining participants, roughly twelve percent, came from the firm's Ordinary Issue and Flexible Annuity departments.

The Method

During interviews and on questionnaires, employees were asked to comment on the extent to which they were (1) monitored by managers, super-

visors or computers and (2) satisfied with these procedures. On questionnaires, they were provided with Likert scales on which they circled numbers between '1' and '7' for each question. A '1' indicated 'very little' and a '7' 'very much'. During interviews employees were asked to explain why they circled the numbers they selected on questionnaires, and to describe how they were monitored. Perceptions about monitoring procedures were verified by examination of job descriptions, through interviews with managers and supervisors, and by observation of employees during work.

Monitoring Results

Questionnaire data indicated that employees were highly monitored and that they were satisfied with this. The results of analysis of variance showed that there was no statistical difference in questionnaire responses among departments. Interviews with employees, however, revealed that monitoring was particularly intense among both claims examiners and employees in POS. Employees in the Word Processing Center indicated somewhat less detailed control over their work, and Flexible Annuity and Ordinary Issue employees said their work was checked only slightly. Manager and supervisor comments supported information obtained through employee interviews.

During interviews, employees were asked to explain the methods used to keep track of their activities. Managers and supervisors were also asked to explain these procedures. Procedures differed somewhat from department to department. Claims examiners handed

TABLE 1
Monitoring

	Mean	Std Dev	n	t	p
Extent of Monitoring	5.65	1.46	77	9.93	<.01
Satisfaction with Monitoring	5.17	.99	77	8.99	<.01

in account sheets on a daily basis, indicating what claims they paid and which were denied payment. Each day, four or five of these sheets were randomly selected for management examination. Managers checked the accuracy and general quality of their employees' work. Furthermore, they checked the number of claims processed. Claims examiners were required to process thirty-five claims a day. This quota was being raised to 45.

Information on claims paid, claims denied, and the number processed daily could likewise be obtained from computer printouts. Management decided how long it should take an employee to process a claim, and therefore the appropriate quotas, based on a variation of Taylor's time and motion study procedures. Over a period of time, management used computers to measure how long it took workers to complete claims. Using this information, they established what they believed to be feasible production levels. Promotions, salary increases and retainment of employees were based on workers' ability to maintain acceptable output.

Though the computer could likewise provide most of this information, employees in POS filled in production sheets as well. These indicated how many cases were handled, how much training time was put in, and miscellaneous activities. Employees were allotted a certain amount of time to complete each task assigned, determined through a procedure similar to that described for claims examiners. Their productivity was calculated as a ratio of the amount of time they were allotted for their tasks and the amount of time they actually took to complete the tasks.

If cases weren't completed in the specified time, employees would go 'overstandard.' 'Overstandards' counted negatively during employee evaluations. Indeed they were primary factors in determining advancement.

Employees entered their initials into the computer for every task they worked on. If a field agent or client had questions on any case, it was therefore possible for managers and supervisors to question whomever was working on the policy under consideration. Furthermore, POS employees met with managers to go over the goals they would meet. Goals included developing competency in handling a number of different types of cases during a predetermined time period.

In the Word Processing Center, employees filled out forms noting when they picked up work, how much they completed, and when they returned the finished product. Each type of task performed had a specific code which was also recorded by the employee. Employees were required to complete each task within a specified amount of time, determined as discussed above, and their productivity was calculated as in POS. Their productivity was likewise considered in their evaluations for promotion and raises. A computer program kept track of accuracy as well as the quantity of work accomplished.

Interviews in the remaining two departments suggested that monitoring was much more lenient there than among claims examiners, POS employees or word processors. In the Flexible Annuity Department, employees circled high numbers on their questionnaires regarding the extent of monitoring. The department manager, however, did not require her staff to record what they did nor how long each task took, though she had been pressured by upper level management to do so. Her employees were able to complete the necessary amount of work without holding to quotas, she said. One worker explained the attitude of both coworkers and manager: "Everything I do does not come out on a list. You don't need a list to tell whether or not people are doing their work. I think there's more of an emphasis here to get things right. Obviously you can't be sitting on some-

thing forever, but if it takes a little longer, no big deal. Just get it right."

Employees in Ordinary Issue were not really sure how they were monitored. The following employee's comments typified the attitude about monitoring: "I guess my work is satisfactory. I guess that's why they don't really bother me much."

Pressure

Evidence presented thus far, both from interviews and questionnaires, suggests that most study participants experienced rather intensive methods of external control. Computer programs had been used to calculate acceptable levels of production. Programs were designed to inform management of the extent to which employees fulfilled their quotas and met their standards. This information was used to determine employee advancement and raises. And yet most employees were satisfied with monitoring methods. This outcome becomes even more apparently incongruent in light of evidence about on-the-job pressure.

On questionnaires and in interviews, employees were also asked about job pressure. For questionnaires, they were given Likert scales where they circled a number indicating the extent to which they felt pressure during their work activities. During interviews they were asked to elaborate on questionnaire responses.

During interviews, claims examiners and POS employees were highly vocal about pressure. For claims examiners it was caused by the fact that

they had quotas to meet. The following comment expresses typical attitudes: "It's a real high pressure job...I wish we could just erase the word production from the vocabulary...No matter what they say, no matter how many times they tell you it's not true, production is the most important thing. Every single day you come in you know you've got to pay 35 claims and if you don't, you worry."

Similarly for POS employees, pressure was due to an enormous work load requiring completion within a limited time period. During interviews, employee after employee complained about pressure. According to one, "There are certain deadlines I have to meet every day. There are days I could actually just walk out the door and not feel bad about it." Another explained, "Agents are out there and they want those cases paid for...and I know they're going to come down pretty hard if we don't get them paid." Regarding the process of setting goals with management, another stated: "We have this new system of goals and standards. It's like a catch-22 situation. If you live up to your goals, it's fine...but if you don't they say that you wrote down on paper that you would do this. This can be used against you. It's like beating your head against a wall if you don't come through." The following comment summarizes well the sentiments of those interviewed: "We're supposed to have 100% productivity. That's a dream. Some days you just can't do it. I'm not sure they even give you fifteen minutes of productivity time for some tasks, but I've yet to see complex processes get done that fast. Most of them take a good half hour."

TABLE 2
On The Job Pressure

Characteristic	Mean	Std Dev	n	t	p
pressure	4.79	1.81	76	3.81	<.01

Managers and supervisors agreed that their employees were under considerable pressure. According to one, "In this department...you have to be at your peak eight hours a day every single day," and in the words of another, "The pressure is due to the numbers. They have to make sure they don't go overstandard; that they're making at least 100% productivity. They worry if someone will get a higher raise because they process more cases a week."

In the Word Processing Center, Flexible Annuity and Ordinary Issue, however, employees did not believe their work was pressured. One worker in the Word Processing Center described it as "the right amount you need to do your work." In Flexible Annuity pressure was only noted at the end of the month.

Relationship Between Monitoring and Pressure

A statistically significant positive relationship was found between data on the extent of monitoring and data on pressure ($r=.26$, $p < .05$). This implied that the more highly employees were monitored, the greater their experience of pressure.

This relationship between monitoring and pressure was supported by information from interviews and observation. Indeed those departments where workers were more highly monitored - Claims and POS - were the ones where employees experienced the greatest pressure. Employees in departments where managers did not record their every action - Flexible Annuity and Ordinary Issue - did not comment on pressure. 8

Employees, however, did not, verbally or in written form, associate pressure with monitoring. Instead, they commented that it was due to the quantity of work they were being asked to accomplish. While no statistical infor-

mation was gathered on workload per se, it was clearly the heaviest in those departments where employees noted both the greatest pressure and the most extensive monitoring procedures: POS and Claims.

While employees were correct that pressure was due to the heavy workload, it is curious that they did not link pressure with monitoring procedures. Monitoring was clearly the instrument used by management to maintain quotas, but at no time did any employee note this.

Satisfaction with Monitoring

Furthermore, even though employees were highly disturbed about pressure, rather than resisting monitoring procedures, employees were satisfied with the extent to which they were watched and the methods used. They were satisfied because they believed that these procedures contributed positively to the fairness and thoroughness of their evaluations. When asked why she was satisfied with the computer monitoring system, an employee from POS said it was because the computer would not lie. Information on what she had accomplished would be right there, in front of management, and for everyone to see. This, she felt, enabled management to evaluate her fairly.

Similar comments were frequently made. For example, another employee attributed her promotion to the monitoring system. She said, "This is the first job I've had where I felt that, if I did my work, I'd be rewarded." A claims examiner had a slightly different reason for her satisfaction. "I'm glad they know what we've done because if we have any problems, they will be able to understand." Most employees, however, were satisfied because they believed a close watch on what they did gave managers the knowledge to evaluate them comprehensively and with equity.

The Larger Picture: No Alternatives?

There may be another explanation for why employees accepted the intensive monitoring which characterized their work: they saw no alternative. Moreover, it is possible that they had so thoroughly accepted an instrumental view of work that they did not expect more from the job.

This explanation received support during the investigation of the firm. When asked if there were other ways that their work process might be controlled, no one responded positively. Instead, the following were a few typical comments: "Mostly the job had already been created...that's what you do." "Most of it is determined by the job itself..." "That's the department, that's the function. It's got to be that way."

Historically, as each new form of external control emerged, workers resisted initially. For example, employees objected to the mechanisms of control embodied in Taylorism. Harry Braverman writes:

What is most noteworthy about this early opposition is that it was not concentrated upon the trappings of the Taylor system, such as the stop-watch and motion study, but upon its essential effort to strip the workers of craft knowledge and autonomous control and confront them with a fully thought-out labor process in which they function as cogs and levers. 9

Workers eventually accepted the intensified or new version of control, however, as alternatives to it disappeared. One instance of this occurred in 1903, after Ford had introduced the assembly line.

The key element of this new organization of labor was the endless conveyor chain upon which car assemblies were carried past fixed

stations where men performed simple operations as they passed...The quickened rate of production in this case depended not only upon the change in the organization of labor, but upon the control which management, at a single stroke, attained over the pace of assembly...and thus (it could) subject its workers to an extraordinary intensity of labor. 10

Although workers reacted violently at first, walking "out in droves," 11 "As Ford...forced the assembly line upon the rest of the automobile industry, in the same degree, workers were forced to submit to it by the disappearance of other forms of work in that industry." 12

According to Michael Best and William Connolly, in

the absence of available examples or theories of work that challenge the dominant work ethic and work system, the worker has no alternative conception against which to appraise his condition. Even a slave would say he is happy if his experience were so constricted that he believed slavery to be a natural and necessary condition for people like him. The worker's experience is not so thoroughly limited, but in modern capitalist society his experience with alternative forms of work has been severely restricted. 13

Most laborers in this country have come to accept an instrumental view of work. Work is not meant to be meaningful or fulfilling in itself. Rather, it has become almost exclusively a means of obtaining the goods and services that are promised by a mass consumption-oriented society, and the leisure in which to make use of these goods.

Unions, though aware of what is being sacrificed, have fostered this mentality. By setting their sights on "bread and butter," they left to others

the creation of alternatives to rigidly monitored, externally controlled work. Few have picked up the slack.

Of course, there have been good reasons for this. Increases in compensation and benefits are winnable. Broader work reform, especially when it requires the relinquishment of control on the part of those who have it, and a shift in values---away from production, profit and growth and toward the needs and potential of the human person---may not be.

Summary and Conclusions

Publicized complaints about monitoring procedures, such as those of New York Times ad takers, suggest employee dissatisfaction with obvious control of work activities. It was expected that employees in this firm, whose work was characterized for the most part by similar intensity of control, would likewise object.

Here, however, monitoring procedures were not a source of unrest. Employees did not associate the extreme pressure they experienced with monitoring, though computerized monitoring methods greatly facilitated the firm's use of quotas and standards to which employees did attribute pressure. And rather than expressing dissatisfaction with computer printouts which logged the types of tasks completed, how long each task took, accuracy, and calculated productivity rates, these employees appreciated this information. According to most, it was because of these careful methods of tallying the quantity of their efforts that they could count on being rewarded ac-

curately, according to merit.

The implication of these findings for management is that intensive computer-based monitoring procedures may be used without precipitating employee unrest, as long as employees believe that such information will make a positive contribution to evaluations and reward systems. Results of this study suggest that it is job pressure, perceived by employees as associated not with control methods but with heavy workloads, which may promote employee dissatisfaction.

These results likewise have implications for unions seeking new members among VDT-using office workers. Rigid monitoring may not be the factor which will stimulate employee interest in unions. Pressure may be the more likely factor. If union organizers hope to appeal to office workers on the basis a firm's control system, they perhaps must first suggest to employees that if it weren't for certain monitoring techniques, managers would not be able to so easily determine and maintain the high production levels which workers do associate with the pressure they find discomfiting.

Yet, perhaps on a more profound level, these employees' acceptance of intensive monitoring procedures may suggest that this new form of external control is already replacing alternatives in the minds of many workers. Perhaps these employees, seeing no alternatives with which to compare their situation, believe they must accept the conditions given to them, in order to obtain the incomes they need to live their real lives, apart from the workplace.

Footnotes

- 1 For a thorough discussion of the development of external control in the U.S. see Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain* (New York, 1979).
- 2 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York, 1974), p. 113.
- 3 Frederick Winslow Taylor, *Scientific Management* (New York and London, 1947), p. 98.
- 4 Braverman, p. 317.

- 5 See, for example, Feldberg and Glenn, 1977; Moberg, 1982; Gregory and Nussbaum, 1982; Dematteo, 1983; Lasden, 1983; Howard, 1985.
- 6 New York Times Unit of the Newspaper Guild of New York, *Union Times*, June 27, 1983, p. 1.
- 7 "VDT's in the Workplace: A Study of the Effects on Employment," *White Collar Report*, II (November, 1984), 33.
- 8 Only the Word Processing Center differed from this pattern. There employees were monitored fairly carefully and yet they did not comment on pressure.
- 9 Braverman, p. 136.
- 10 Ibid., 141.
- 11 Eli Chinoy, "Manning the Machine - The Assembly Line Worker," in Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Human Shape of Work* (New York, 1964), p. 53.
- 12 Braverman, p. 141.
- 13 Michael Best and William Connolly, *The Politicized Economy*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts and Toronto, 1982), p. 121.

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