

# Employee Monitoring Tools

And the right way to implement them



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**Employee monitoring has many uses. You can streamline productivity, improve processes, make sure employees are getting their work done, and much more. However, you can also quickly destroy employee morale and even cross into legally questionable territory.**

**In this special report, we've collected the best of Business Management Daily's advice on employee monitoring, bossware, and how to best navigate this tricky topic. Whether you're a small business, Fortune 500 company, in-person, remote, or hybrid — we've got the insight you need.**

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# Employee Monitoring: How to (and not to) track employee productivity

Before 2020, employee monitoring in a traditional office environment was pretty straightforward. Managers and supervisors kept track of employee performance and productivity by directly monitoring them throughout the workday. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 threw a wrench into this tried and true system for most companies.

In a few short months, nearly every business had to incorporate a remote workforce of some capacity to continue functioning. Before the pandemic, only 6% of employees were remote workers. As early as May 2020, [one-third of all employees](#) began working from home.

This fed the need for new ways to track employee activity, as managers could no longer directly monitor their teams in person. Beyond that, droves of companies that were inexperienced with remote work were creating monitoring policies for the first time. That led to the creation of numerous employee monitoring solutions, including computer monitoring through cloud-based software, GPS tracking, keylogging, and other methods.

Yet, the advent of more rigorous ways to monitor remote employees has led to some backlash and privacy concerns, such as watching employees through their webcams. Despite the concerns, it's clear that remote work is here to stay. When polled, a mere [6% of workers](#) said they wanted to go back to working entirely on-site. Instead, it seems that a hybrid of remote work and on-site work is the way going forward, with [74% of U.S. companies](#) either already using a hybrid approach or planning to incorporate one in the future.

Since employee monitoring is such a big issue today, I've put together this guide on properly implementing employee monitoring without violating anyone's privacy. Read on to discover the most successful types of workplace monitoring for both remote workers and office workers.

## **The history of employee monitoring's various forms**

While the pandemic skyrocketed employee monitoring into the mainstream, it's not a new concept. Not only that, but certain businesses have used employee monitoring software for many years before 2020. An example would be call centers, where employee phone calls and voicemails were recorded and closely monitored to ensure their quality and efficiency.

Customer support is another industry where employee monitoring tools have long been the norm. If you've ever called a customer support line, you've likely heard the classic automated phrase, "This call may be recorded for quality assurance or training purposes."

Well, that's a classic form of employee monitoring right there. Companies would record customer support calls to ensure customer satisfaction and use them for future employee training.

For example, suppose they found an exemplary customer support call where the employee was courteous and knowledgeable. In that case, they'll likely include the recording in training for new employees so they'll know what a successful call sounds like. Conversely, they could also pick a poor customer support call to use in future training as an example of what NOT to do.

Post-COVID-19, many employee tracking software programs started popping up, allowing companies to track employee productivity, computer activity, emails, and even individual keystrokes.

Let's look at the most common methods for employee monitoring for remote, mobile, and on-site workers.

## **Employee monitoring methods for remote team members**

Has your workforce gone almost entirely remote since 2020? Have you been scrambling to find a way to track key performance metrics without invading employee privacy? If so, there are plenty of employee monitoring systems that allow you to discretely keep track of tasks, work hours, quality of work, and more.



That can help you salvage your productivity and regain control over your workforce without coming off as a tyrannical micromanager. That said, there's a fine line between healthy employee monitoring and invasive workplace surveillance, so you must be careful. Here are some of the most popular methods for measuring the productivity of your remote workforce.

### **Internet activity monitoring and tracking app usage**

When working from home, sometimes the temptation to surf the internet for personal reasons can become too great. *In small doses, this isn't too big of an issue.* However, if left unchecked, internet surfing and app usage can **dramatically affect employee productivity.**

For example, say you notice that an employee is frequently late getting back to clients, misses deadlines, and not communicating. In this case, being able to track their URLs and app usage can come in handy. That way, you can discover if they've been wasting time on YouTube or Instagram excessively during work hours. *The usefulness of these tracking features doesn't end there, though.*

On the other side of the spectrum, say that you notice an employee is falling behind — but it's not due to wasting time. After checking their internet history and app usage, you discover that they're struggling to use a new piece of software properly. From there, you can hook them up with the proper training to increase their productivity.

To take things a step further, you could also incorporate web-filtering and URL-blocking features. For instance, if you don't want employees checking their social media during the workday, you can choose to **restrict sites like Facebook and Instagram** (you can also block sites containing inappropriate content).

Certain types of employee monitoring software allow you to enable 'time-wasting' sites like Facebook and YouTube, but only for a

limited period. Others have special tracking features for social media sites, where you can view specific employee actions.

These features come in handy for tracking positions like social media managers, where the job requires them to use apps like Facebook. However, the special tracking features will let you know if they're doing their job on social media or are checking their personal feeds.

## **Screen sharing and video monitoring**

A significant concern most companies have with remote work is they can't monitor employees in real-time like they could in the office. They feel that there'll be a steep dropoff in employee productivity, which doesn't have to be the case.

That's a big reason why many employee monitoring programs began to offer screenshots, screen sharing, and video monitoring as part of their features. Screen sharing of an employee's computer will update managers on an employee's progress on tasks, emails, and other workflows.

This type of employee monitoring is excellent for project management, as it makes tracking progress on individual tasks a breeze. That can also save money, as a supervisor can quickly see if an employee is on the right track with a project or not.

Without a form of monitoring in place, the employee may embark down the wrong path, which can derail progress on the project and cost valuable resources to fix.

The most effective form of screen sharing is only interested in tracking the work getting done on the device through tracking timesheets, user activity (levels of engagement during the day), performance metrics, and other non-invasive ways to measure productivity.

## **Legal issues and concerns over webcam surveillance**

Video surveillance is an area that gives many remote workers privacy concerns. For one, many remote workers worry that their employers are spying on them through their webcams.

*So is Big Brother keeping an eye on everything you do and say at work?*

Let's look at what the law says to find out.

The [Electronic Communications Privacy Act](#) (ECPA) of 1986 is the guiding piece of federal legislation in this regard. It states that employers have the legal right to monitor employees' verbal and written communications for any business purpose. That's especially true if the communications are made via company equipment (laptops, phone systems, etc.).

The key takeaway here is that employers are allowed to keep track of your business-related activities, not personal ones. That means it's illegal for them to record your personal calls made on your smartphone.

Besides monitoring verbal and written communications, employers can integrate further monitoring methods — but here's the caveat — **with employee consent**. That means if a company doesn't have a written policy stating that they'll watch employees on webcam, they likely aren't doing it secretly. In fact, it would be illegal to do so.

Also, the ECPA is a federal law, and some states have additional laws that value employee privacy even more. You should check the regulations for your state to find out if you're protected from certain forms of monitoring or surveillance.

## **Time tracking and file tracking**

Another way to monitor remote employees is to use time tracking or file tracking software. Software with time tracking features allows employees to control when they clock in and clock out. As such, they're free to clock out to take a break whenever they need it (with managers having the ability to track work hours and breaks, of course).

This type of employee monitoring is both effective and empowering, as it places the onus on the employees to keep track of their own time. That's a great way to track employee progress without worrying about violating their privacy.

Besides clocking in and out each day, time tracking features also allow employees to track hours spent working on specific projects and tasks. As a manager, that makes it effortless to find out how much work got done on any given day. You'll be able to see **when everyone started work, what they worked on, and how long they spent working on it**.

That eliminates a lot of the guesswork involved with monitoring remote workers, which is a definite plus. Not only that, but time tracking data is also invaluable for making more accurate time estimates and budgets for future projects and tasks.

### **File tracking uses and benefits**

A deeper version of time tracking is file tracking, where employers receive detailed reports on which files were worked on, by whom, and for how long. That comes in handy when most of the work done at your organization is completed through files, such as Word documents or spreadsheets on a shared drive.

*File tracking has other benefits as well.*

For instance, with file tracking software in place, you won't have to spend hours looking for lost or misplaced files. You'll be able to follow a detailed trail of where the file has been and who scanned it/edited it last.

Another area where file tracking comes in handy is with **audits**. As an organization, it's crucial for employees to follow your policies for document handling and retention. Otherwise, you'll wind up with documents and files scattered all over the place, which spells disaster for an audit.

With file tracking in place, *any gaps in the audit trail will surface immediately*, as you'll instantly know if a file has been misplaced, lost, or handled incorrectly. That can help save time and reduce costs due to the boosted efficiency.

Last but not least, file tracking will tack on additional security for all your files and documents. Certain industry regulations require highly specific document handling procedures. For instance, some legal or business files containing sensitive information can only be accessed by authorized parties — the violation of which is a crime.

With file tracking, you can automate security alerts to trigger when an unauthorized user attempts to access one of these documents. You can also set up automatic alerts when someone tries to move sensitive documents from their secure location.

### **Keystroke logging**

Another form of employee activity tracking is keystroke logging.

*What's that?*

Keylogging programs record each individual keystroke of an employee during their work hours. Keystrokes are how you communicate with your computer, and more goes into monitoring them than you might think.

For instance, did you know that the velocity of your keystroke is a measurable metric? Or that keyloggers also track the length and time of the keypress? Time, length, velocity, and the name of the key are all metrics that a keylogging program will track.

*Why is this valuable information?*

It is because you can decipher quite a bit from interpreting a user's keystrokes. Employers can use keylogging to keep track of individual tasks, workplace communications, and more. Yet, keylogging has a notable dark side, and some view it as an outright violation of employee privacy in all its forms. The primary concern is that keylogging will reveal quite a bit of sensitive employee information.

For instance, if you're keystroke logging an employee, it's not uncommon for them to type their:

- Personal address
- Social security number
- Credit card/debit card number (if making a business purchase to be reimbursed for later)
- Company passwords
- Private messages

As you can imagine, all this private information would be disastrous in the wrong hands. That's why lots of keylogging programs are used for nefarious reasons, such as identity theft. For these reasons, many employers have stopped using keylogging programs entirely, as they believe the security risks outweigh the benefits.

## **Types of employee monitoring for other workers**

Not every employee is going to work from home — but employee monitoring is still a necessity. Also, some positions don't involve working from home OR at an office.

Delivery drivers are an example of this, as their vehicles are technically their offices. As you can imagine, this type of work requires a particular kind of monitoring. Most companies like Uber and DoorDash use GPS tracking to monitor productivity, efficiency, and timeliness of delivery.

There are also types of employee monitoring that take place in the office but don't involve the physical presence of managers or supervisors. Let's take a look at the most common types of employee monitoring for office employees and mobile employees.

### **Tracking employee emails**

[Over 50%](#) of all companies monitor employee emails, which is an effective way to prevent potential issues before they occur.

*How is that?*

Let's say a particularly disgruntled employee has had enough and is ready to quit. However, before leaving they decide to leak a ton of company trade secrets to a competitor out of spite. With an email tracker in place, you could intercept this damaging email and delete it before it gets the chance to do any harm.

That's an extreme example, but it conveys the power of monitoring employee emails.

Remember, the Electronic Communications Privacy Act states that it's legal for companies to track all verbal and written communications, and email definitely falls within that umbrella. So you shouldn't be surprised if you discover that an employer is tracking company emails, as it's well within their federal rights.

Another use for tracking employee emails is that it can help settle disputes. An example would be examining employee emails to determine whether a case of sexual harassment took place or not.



Proponents of this monitoring technique state that it's invaluable for protecting sensitive information from leaving the company and falling into the wrong hands.

*Email monitoring isn't without its critics, though.*

Detractors of this method state that email monitoring builds feelings of distrust and resentment among employees. They may feel that you don't trust them by reading their emails, which can hurt workplace morale. There is evidence to back this up, too.

A study by Gallup found that **employees that felt disengaged** were [more likely to leave the organization](#). A high turnover can destroy your productivity, so it's best to be transparent with employees about email monitoring. In particular, let them know that it's to ensure consistency in your messaging, not because you don't trust their abilities.

You may also wish to share the frequency of such monitoring. For example, employee emails may be tracked but only pulled in the case of a specific incident. In that situation, it may raise good will for employees to know that you're not regularly looking over their communication.

## **GPS tracking for mobile employees**

If you're in charge of delivery drivers, you likely already have some form of GPS tracking in place at your company. In today's age, employers can use GPS trackers on more than just company vehicles, too. Location trackers also exist for work phones and tablets, which are primarily used to track the work of sales representatives.

This technology enables managers to always know where their employees are when they're on the clock.

Besides monitoring employee locations in real-time, location trackers also allow managers to view historical data, such as the routes chosen for customer deliveries. That will make it easy to identify the quickest and most reliable routes for drivers to use in the future.

Another advantage of implementing GPS trackers is you can quickly confirm if a package was delivered or not. If the customer reports no delivery, you can consult the location tracker data to see if a driver made it to their property with the package.

Then there's the additional safety that GPS trackers provide to mobile employees. Should a driver go missing or get into an accident, the location tracker can quickly triangulate their location to send help.

### **Other uses for location tracking software**

Construction contractors and companies with field service teams (plumbing, locksmiths, HVAC, landscaping, etc.) also use location tracking software, albeit in a different way than delivery driver managers.

Contractors use GPS software to confirm that their crew arrives on-site when they're scheduled. They can also analyze the data to estimate arrival times for clients better.

For instance, if they notice that their crew has a more challenging time getting to a particular part of town (either due to heavy traffic or another issue), they can quote customers a later arrival time to accommodate the delay.

That will help you avoid disappointing customers due to your crew arriving late, which will improve your customer satisfaction rates.

### **Monitoring phone calls and voicemails**

Call centers and customer support teams have long had these forms of employee monitoring in place. Yet, they aren't the only ones incorporating recorded phone calls to keep track of business communications.

Procurement managers may also choose to record employee phone calls with suppliers.

*Why is that?*

Healthy supplier relationships are integral to the success of the procurement process, which is why managers may choose to monitor their calls to ensure employees are being cordial, helpful, and polite with suppliers.

Sales teams may also choose to record client calls to monitor the quality of their selling techniques and phone etiquette. After combing through the data, sales managers can identify the types of calls that are the most effective at converting prospects to use in future training.

Monitoring voicemails has become far less common, as the practice of leaving voicemails has become antiquated. If clients or suppliers don't answer their phones, it's far more common for employees to send an email or instant message instead of recording a voicemail.

### **Instant message monitoring**

Speaking of instant messages, it's common for employers to monitor messages that get sent through apps like [Slack](#).

For the most part, IMs have replaced voicemails (and even emails in some cases) due to how quick and efficient they are to use. If you need to quickly notify a coworker of an upcoming meeting or task that's due — nothing beats sending them a quick message via instant chat.

Tracking employee IMs is primarily effective at **resolving in-house disputes and issues**.

For instance, if an employee claims a coworker is bullying them in the office, checking the IMs of the associate in question is a reliable way to uncover evidence.

Employee monitoring software often has features that enable managers to view employee IMs both in real-time and for future use.

### **CCTV monitoring**

Lastly, some businesses choose to use closed-circuit TV cameras to monitor their property and the performance of their employees. It's common for establishments

to place cameras in areas where employees aren't supposed to be (such as food storage or money vaults).

Some businesses set up CCTV cameras around the office to encourage better performance from their employees, but this can lead to trust and privacy issues, so it's not recommended.

CCTV cameras are also valuable for protecting properties at night and acting as a deterrent for thieves.

## **Final takeaways: Employee monitoring**

By now, you should be more familiar with the different types of employee monitoring, both for remote work, mobile work, and for on-site workers.

While any form of monitoring is bound to raise privacy concerns eventually, employee monitoring can be a useful tool when implemented properly. Over monitoring could harm employee morale. However, the right amount of monitoring can ensure productivity and provide valuable data.

The pandemic in 2020 catapulted remote work monitoring into the mainstream, with many companies now adopting different types of employee monitoring software.

It's best to focus only on monitoring **work hours**, **task completion**, and **employee communications** to avoid privacy concerns. Not only are these the most effective metrics to monitor, but they're also well within your rights, as stated by the ECPA.

## **Track productivity without bossware and employee monitoring**

To say the absolute least, the pandemic changed a lot about how we work. As safety precautions turned lively offices into wastelands of empty chairs, people started scratching their heads wondering whether they actually needed to work

from a desk in somebody else's rental space. Eventually, office restrictions lifted, but working in pajamas? That part wasn't so easy to undo.

Today, remote jobs are the norm, or at least they're becoming such. One of the first questions interviewees ask these days is whether or not earning a paycheck means leaving the comforts of home, and if an employer insists on in-office attendance, they usually end up shorthanded.

In the wake of all the changes, some employers began to wonder how it would be possible to track employee productivity when they can't see the employees doing actual work. Enter monitoring tools.

## **Snooping with software surveillance**

Remote work exposed a major wrinkle in the workplace: setting and reaching goals wasn't enough. Somehow, physical presence was required as well, so to bridge the attendance gap, some employers required their teams to show up to the office once or twice a week. Some required team members to appear on webcams in full work attire. Anything to keep up appearances.

But then things got a little weird. Bossware, as it's called, started to be installed on employee computers. Rather than checking in to see how things were going, these apps granted managers unprecedented access to monitor the activities of all their team members by tracking keystrokes, reading chats, generating productivity scores, and even using spyware to track social media usage.

Worst of all, some companies didn't even tell their employees about the surveillance software, hoping to keep productivity monitoring a secret indefinitely. Spoiler alert: they didn't.

## **What it feels like to be spied on**

Perhaps the most unnerving part of bossware was learning that it didn't originate with the pandemic. In fact, many of these productivity tracking programs were used in secret long before remote work was popular. It shocked many of us to learn that trust was a commodity even more rare than previously thought.

Let's be clear: spying on your employees isn't just unethical, it's plain wrong. You make a deal with the devil when you use bossware to track productivity. Rather than trusting employees to use their time wisely and judging them by the actual work they do, surveillance software sends a clear message. A message that your workplace is one where even the slightest suspicion of remote employees warrants an invasion of their privacy; something which will destroy retention in the long run.

Along with the lack of privacy, being the object of constant surveillance is bad for productivity. Something happens in the brain akin to panic when it knows it's being watched, and the result is a lack of focus that makes task management a lot harder.

### **With surveillance, work environments may suffer:**

- A lack of productivity
- Employee distrust and resentment
- Low retention
- Disunity among team workflows
- Possible lawsuits

And since few laws exist to monitor the monitors, companies are getting a little greedy with the amount of information they collect. The [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) minces no words about the plight: "Under current U.S. law, employers have too much leeway to install surveillance software on devices they own." On top of that, there doesn't seem to be any rush to outlaw these programs. To the contrary, in fact, business is booming for the software companies making these products.

### **This isn't the information you're looking for**

As an employer, you need to ask yourself what you actually want to learn through employee monitoring software. Do you suspect someone's work is suffering because they waste too much time online? Are you worried an employee is badmouthing the company? If so, just go with your gut. Have a conversation, get a Performance Improvement Plan going, but don't add to the stress of everyone else's workday by introducing espionage into the workplace.



Look, as workers, we get that bosses want to know what we're doing. We understand that they have to check in to make sure we're being productive. All of that is okay. Having work goals, productivity targets, and more is not a new concept. What's *not* okay is having Slack monitor every single keystroke so they can see what we're typing when we have a second to ourselves. Reading personal messages, gleaning passwords, accessing personal data—these are not things our bosses should have access to.

Even worse, these tools don't necessarily directly monitor productivity. For many employees, stepping away from the computer to think about a problem, or taking a break to address a personal issue helps them improve productivity when they get back to the task at hand.

If there's a problem with employee activity, the best thing to do is to talk to your employee. If they're suddenly not completing as much work as they did before, or the quality dropped, that's a fine conversation to have and metric to hold them accountable by.

## **How should managers monitor productivity?**

Hopefully, by now you see why using these programs is a detriment to the workplace. However, that still doesn't solve the problem of how remote teams make it more difficult to track productivity. So let's talk about it.

First off, set clear expectations. Far too many companies have an attitude of, "if you don't have something to do, find something to do," which places the onus of productivity on people with no business making those decisions. Think about it: do you really want the newbie reorganizing company files just because they had to kill time?

If employees don't have work to do, it's not their fault. Installing tracking tools to punish them for it only reinforces that management is failing them. Meaningful work drives retention, so when employees are stuck doing things no one cares about, what they need is better project planning, not more monitoring. Ensure that employees have adequate work available to them. If there's a chance they'll run out of tasks for the day, or have downtime between tasks, provide something for them

to do during that time. This could involve doing required training, reading up on the latest trends on industry sites, or some other productive use of downtime.

Second, base your metrics on achievements, not optics. Resist the urge to scold employees when they're not glued to their monitors typing a million words a minute. Most employees want to do good work—give them something to work toward, rather than pushing them into meaningless occupations (which usually leads to burnout). Gaging how much an employee accomplishes in a given time, and the quality of the work, is much more meaningful than minutes sitting at a computer.

Finally, give employees ownership over projects wherever possible. When workers get to put their own names on things, they are more likely to do good work. Conversely, when they're just cogs in their manager's machine, they may not find it all that important to stay on task.

### **Track time, not activity**

Instead of seeing what employees do when they're not working, why not track what they do when they *are* working? Platforms like [Tick](#) provide project bases to log time against, providing a clearer picture of how long it takes people to get their work done. Who knows? You may find that your lollygaggers are actually your most efficient workers, and the reason they look like slackers is because they don't have enough to do.

In the end, it's a win-win. Employees have work to do, and managers have a tracking software platform to keep them busy, forging a connection within teams that drives goodwill and encourages productivity. *These* are the kinds of foundations that create strong businesses, not spy software.

### **Take advantage of regular check-ins**

No employee is perfect. Okay some are, but most of us just need a nudge in the right direction from time to time, and those conversations have to come from managers. Make sure to schedule regular check-ins with your teams to see how work is going.

Work takes up almost half of our waking hours. Like anything in life, routine can easily become rigmarole that leads to complacency. Without communication, complacency gets misinterpreted as apathy or even incompetence, leading to doubt that festers and creates broken bridges, confusion, anger, and ultimately disappointment.

Just talk to your employees! Give them a judgment-free listening ear that respects their feelings. You'll usually find they're more eager to be successful than you thought. Most of us just want to be heard, so provide that space at work.

### **Give recognition where recognition is due**

Nothing motivates quite like a personal compliment, be it a sincere pat on the back or a nice bonus check. Showing people they matter is a hallmark of great companies, and it's easy to see why. People love recognition. Taking time to recognize an employee's hard work isn't always the highest priority on most managers' lists, but the dividends are huge.

If an employee is having a hard time succeeding at work, try giving them a win here and there. You may find that it helps them grow and settle into a work ethic you can count on later. At the very least, you're not hurting anyone by making people feel good about their work.

### **Your teams are your responsibility**

If you're tempted to spy on your employees, ask yourself how things got this bad. If you're at the point where bossware seems like the best option, then there certainly are problems. And bossware is only likely to make them worse.

Your teams deserve your trust, and with a little effort and enthusiasm, you can create a culture where people want to do good instead of going to great lengths to hide being bad.