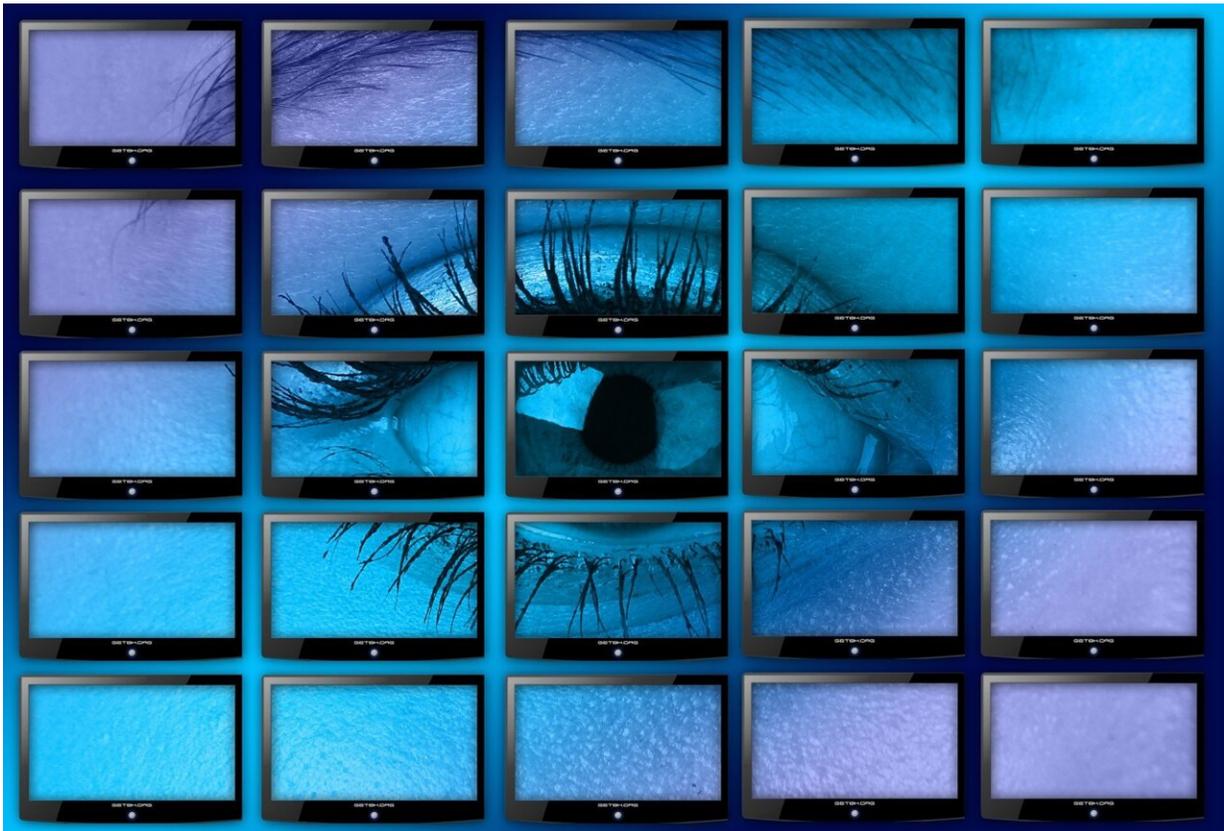


Employer surveillance during COVID has damaged trust

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Increasing use of staff surveillance by employers during the COVID-19 pandemic endangers trust in the workplace, according to a major new report by the University of St Andrews.

The study, for the European Commission's Joint Research Council, also warns employers not to sacrifice ethics for the sake of efficiency as it can backfire leading to [mental health issues](#), productivity decline and staff resignations.

Webcam photographs, recording keystrokes and movement trackers have all been increasingly used by employers as millions of workers were forced to work from home in 2020.

The demand for employee [monitoring](#) software increased by 108 percent in April 2020, according to the major review of research literature on workplace surveillance from the past four decades.

Author Professor Kirstie Ball, of the School of Management at the University of St Andrews, said: "There is a clear need for trust to be rebuilt in the workplace between staff and employers post-COVID.

"Where monitoring has a specific purpose such as health and safety, it can actually reassure staff. Or in development and training it can provide valuable feedback.

"However, it can also have [negative impacts](#) too. A heavy focus on monitoring the quantity of output can reduce work quality.

"Where there is no explicit purpose for the monitoring, and information is collected for its own sake, negative attitudes can result including: perceptions of decreased fairness and justice, decreased satisfaction, increased stress and a decline in trust."

Excessive monitoring, according to the report, can be considered by [staff](#) as demonstrating a lack of confidence or belief in employees. Low trust in the workplace can then cause a vicious cycle.

Professor Ball said: "Employers impose punitive surveillance which causes the behaviors it was put in place to prevent, as employees try to resist or avoid it. The [social support](#) provided by managers for monitored workers is crucial to avoid some of these negative outcomes."

The report also notes that there is a danger of low managerial support for monitored employees.

Professor Ball added: "There is a real need for more research on how data is used by employers and policy may need to change to reflect these new ways of working."

The study for the EC's Joint Research Council covers a wide range of aspects including the new ways in which employees are monitored, mental health risks and the consequences of monitoring for work culture, employment relations and [trust](#).

More information: K. Ball, Electronic Monitoring and Surveillance in the Workplace, Publications Office of the European Union (2021). [DOI: 10.2760/5137](#), [publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/...ory/handle/JRC125716](#)

Provided by University of St Andrews

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