

Surveillance and transparency as parallel systems of workplace analytics

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Abstract

While surveillance and transparency have each received extensive attention on their own, there is a paucity of research integrating these concepts to produce a more nuanced analysis of their effects when deployed through workplace analytics. This developmental paper proposes a conceptual framework that integrates surveillance and transparency as parallel effects of workplace analytics in order to produce new and deeper insights into their impact on employee experience, and specifically on intra-organisational trust dynamics and employee engagement. Guided by the proposed conceptual framework, a future empirical study will be undertaken to examine the interplay between surveillance and transparency and their subsequent impact on intra-organisational trust and employee engagement.

Keywords: workplace analytics, surveillance, transparency, trust, engagement

1 Introduction

Despite workplace analytics being a nascent area of research (Coolen et al., 2023), studies have linked workplace analytics to two contrasting perspectives: surveillance and transparency (Viola & Laidler, 2022). On the one hand, workplace analytics can provide managers with a variety of surveillance measures, including digital recruitment tools to headhunt and filter candidates; telephone monitoring to assess call waiting time, idle time, and number of calls completed; and performance monitoring to generate actionable insights through the evaluation of employees' performance. These surveillance measures (and others) collect and analyse data related to employees and managers outside the organisation (e.g., demographic data, education, social network

participation), their positions in the organisation (e.g., position status, salary, benefits, date of promotion), the work they have undertaken in the organisation (e.g., individual performance, performance evaluations, sentiments, message content), and the employees themselves (e.g., personality traits, cognitive abilities, skills, health, expertise, training completed) (Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020). Although these data can provide valuable insights to inform workplace decisions, research suggests that surveillance can reduce productivity, heighten employees' stress levels, undermine privacy, escalate acts of resistance, exacerbate counterproductive work behaviours, intensify opportunism among employees, and heighten employees' fear of management.

On the other hand, workplace analytics can provide insights on employees' behaviour, and their daily and routine practices, contributing to transparency and increased awareness of employees' practices that may need to be adjusted e.g., too much reliance on specific individuals while other key collaborators may be ignored. This transparency can ultimately lead to corrective action and a more positive employee experience (John et al., 2023). Transparency is a multifaceted concept that is viewed as a public value or norm of behaviour designed to counter corruption, inefficiency, and incompetence while also enhancing accountability to ensure organisational members behave adequately and appropriately through the act of being open (Meijer, 2009; Michener & Bersch, 2013). It is also portrayed as an antidote to the issues associated with workplace surveillance, ensuring organisations, managers, and employees comply with expectations and make informed decisions that evoke a sense of justice, responsibility, and fairness (Johnson & Regan, 2014). While surveillance and transparency have each received extensive attention on their own, the dynamic interplay between both has received little attention, with their relationship often taken for granted (Johnson & Regan, 2014; Viola & Laidler, 2022).

This developmental paper integrates surveillance and transparency as parallel systems of workplace analytics to propose a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that aims to produce new and deeper multi-level insights, while also answering previous calls to study their impact on employee experience and notably on intra-organisational trust dynamics as well as employee engagement (Kayas, 2023; Viola & Laidler, 2022). Moving forward, the conceptual framework will guide an empirical examination of how

the surveillance and transparency embedded in workplace analytics affects intra-organisational trust dynamics and employee engagement. The next section presents and discusses the literature underpinning this study's proposed conceptual framework. The paper concludes by outlining how the project will move forward through an empirical investigation.

2 Theoretical foundations

2.1 Workplace analytics as a parallel system of surveillance and transparency

Workplace analytics turns insights into action by continuously monitoring and measuring the abilities, aptitudes, behaviour, health and fitness, performance, personal characteristics, personality traits, psychological disposition, sentiment, and skills of employees and managers to determine whether organisational expectations have been achieved (Fernandez (Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020). Although workplace analytics is a relatively new monitoring practice (Ball, 2021; Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020), it is becoming widespread within organisations being enabled by technological advancements and digital workplace transformation but also the popularity of alternative modes of work, such as remote and hybrid work (John et al., 2023). Within this context, employees may perceive the surveillance embedded in workplace analytics as an acceptable part of working life (Ball, 2021). They may even view it as a positive organisational practice if it benefits employees, informs decisions around remuneration and promotion, and exposes antisocial behaviour like favouritism (Kayas, 2023; Kayas et al., 2019). However, if the surveillance embedded in workplace analytics is perceived as too intensive or personalised (Ball, 2021; Sewell et al., 2012), violates boundaries by reaching into the personal lives of employees (Kayas, 2023), collects and analyses data beyond employees' behaviour and performance (Kayas et al., 2019; Sewell et al., 2012), then it can become a controversial organisational practice with negative implications for employees, managers, and organisations (Ball, 2021; Kayas, 2023).

In addition to providing organisations with the mechanisms needed to implement surveillance, workplace analytics also provides the means to implement transparency practices, with both surveillance and transparency producing accounts that are used to scrutinise the watched through information technology systems that collect data from

internal and external sources to determine whether they are behaving as expected (Michener & Bersch, 2013; Viola & Laidler, 2022). Despite their similarities, both have different rationales, with transparency becoming a mobilising idea for resisting or overcoming the negative consequences of surveillance. Defined as ‘the ability to look clearly through the windows of an institution’ (den Boer, 1998, p. 105), and the idea ‘that something is happening behind curtains and once these curtains are removed, everything is out in the open and can be scrutinized’ Meijer (2009, p. 258).’ The aphorism of transparency thus being ‘sunlight disinfects’ (Johnson & Regan, 2014).

Public debates have argued that improved transparency can induce better oversight and decisions, while restoring relations damaged through surveillance (Brin, 1998). This is achieved by exerting pressure on institutions, organisations, leaders, managers, and employees to ensure they behave as expected by their constituents (Johnson & Regan, 2014). By giving people better information that can be used to contribute to the rationalisation of organisations, transparency can reduce corruption, inefficiency, and incompetence, while also enhancing accountability, and opening institutions and organisations to ensure their members act adequately and appropriately (Meijer, 2009; Michener & Bersch, 2013). Proponents of transparency claim that those who are subjected to it are less likely to betray the trust of their constituents or neglect their responsibilities, while opponents claim that if transparency is unidirectional, unstructured, and decontextualised, then it will not benefit society, and could lead to a loss of trust by undermining freedom and threatening privacy (Meijer, 2009).

By developing a conceptual framework that integrates the surveillance and transparency embedded in workplace analytics, it provides a more comprehensive lens through which their impact on employee experience can be examined. This study focuses on two aspects of employee experience in the workplace that have been identified by existing research as vital for employee well-being, fulfilment, and performance (e.g., Chamakiotis et al., 2021; John et al., 2023) i.e., intra-organisational trust dynamics and the engagement of employees, both of which have been overlooked in the workplace analytics literature.

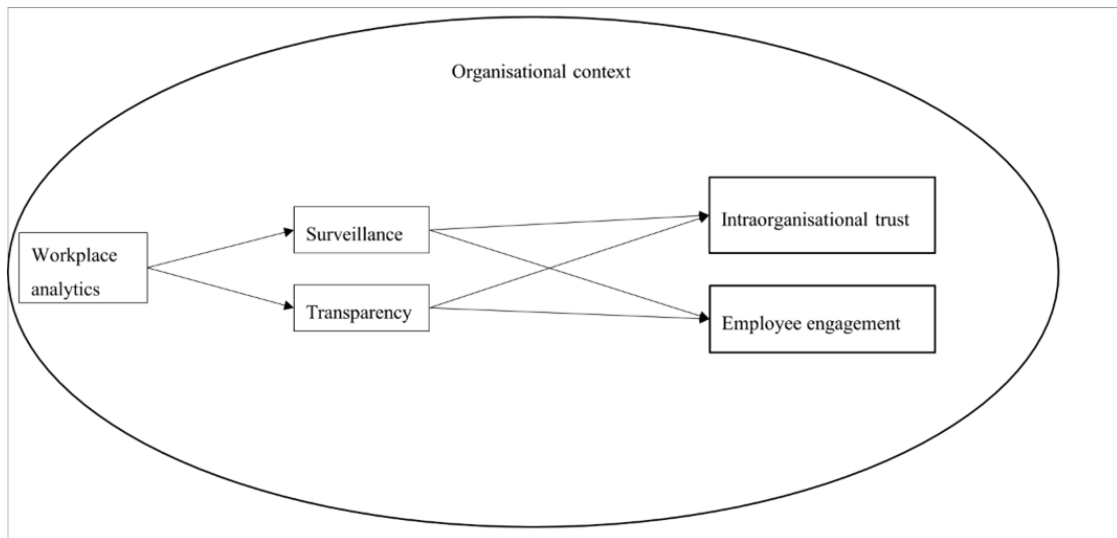


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

2.2 Employee engagement

Employees who are engaged in their work are said to have a sense of strong connection and identification with the work as well as the organisation (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Kahn (1990, p. 694) defined employee engagement as ‘the harnessing of organisation members’ selves to their work roles.’ Although there has been a growing literature on employee engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Monje-Amor et al., 2020), research has predominantly focused on traditional and permanent work arrangements in collocated organisations. Alternative forms of work, such as virtual teams and hybrid work, are challenging conventional understandings of employee engagement due to varied employee experience and increased dependency on information and communication technologies that may affect employees’ connection and identification with the organisation (Panteli et al., 2019). John et al. (2023) has shown that employee engagement is likely to improve when work analytics are used in hybrid work context due to the transparency provided especially through insights on employees’ online behaviour and communication practices.

2.3 Intra-organisational trust

The concept of trust has received considerable attention among organisational researchers, leading to a confusing potpourri of definitions that have been applied to different units and levels of analysis; thus, making it a particularly difficult concept to define (Connell & Mannion, 2006). Mayer et al. (1995, p. 172) develop a widely held definition, asserting that trust is a psychological state in which there is a ‘willingness

of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.’ Crucially, they highlight how the context within which a trustor perceives a relationship of trust can affect the need for trust and the evaluation of trustworthiness. A change in the sociopolitical context within an organisation or a perceived violation of the trustee can thus lead to the re-evaluation of trustworthiness. Should the introduction of an organisational control system provide managers with the means to deploy invasive surveillance measures, then this change in context could undermine trustworthiness, leading to a re-evaluation of intra-organisational relationships that may affect employees emotional state and consequently their productivity. Studies of trust thus necessitate an understanding of context to ascertain how it affects perceptions of trustworthiness.

3 Conclusions and implications for further research

This developmental paper proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the literatures related to the impact of the surveillance and transparency embedded in workplace analytics, including intra-organisational trust and engagement. Moving forward, this project will continue to develop the conceptual framework to ensure it produces novel and nuanced insights into workplace analytics. Ultimately, the conceptual framework will guide an empirical examination of the affects the surveillance and transparency embedded in workplace analytics have on intra-organisational trust and employee engagement, which we intend to present at the conference.

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