ENGLISH 204
FINAL EXAM
FALL 2005-2006

Directions: Texts A and B both discuss the controversial issue of monitoring of employees. Critique Text A, synthesizing information from B to support your thesis. (

TEXT A

Policing the workforce (from Internet Freedom website)

By Dave Amis, Journalist (Jan. 1, 2000)

Increasingly, employees are being punished for what their bosses consider 'inappropriate' use of the Internet. Dave Amis argues that technology is being used to erode privacy and stifle free speech.

1.   In a survey for Elron, developers of the monitoring software package Message Inspector, more than half of the 805 workers questioned said they had received obscene, sexist or otherwise offensive e-mails in the past year. Employers are responding with a rapid expansion of Internet and e-mail monitoring in the workplace. Rather than giving the office pest who views sex sites and sends off colour e-mails a sharp rebuke to put them in their place, workers are increasingly launching actions against their employers for failure to provide a 'non-threatening' work environment. Chevron Oil, for example, had to pay $2.2million compensation to female employees claiming sexual harassment after the widespread circulation of an e-mail entitled "20 reasons why a beer is better than a woman". Initiating such actions encourages employers to police relations among their workers. Increasingly, people are more likely to regard their colleagues as a problem rather than an ally, and are looking to their employers for protection.

2.   According to an American Management Association survey released in 1999, 45% of major U.S. firms record and review employee communications and activities, including phone calls, e-mail, and computer files. It is estimated that by 2001, 80 % of large companies in the US will be spending a total of $200 million on filtering software. Rapid technological developments, far from empowering staff, have made employer monitoring considerably easier. Elron's Message Inspector software prevents 'objectionable' material being sent under a company name, and diverts that material to management for investigation. Silent Watch from Adavi can monitor hundreds of computers providing alarms to the system administrator's viewer on 'objectionable' Web sites or 'inappropriate' text content based on a dictionary defined by the administrator.

3.   The Oxford English Dictionary provided a list of 40,000 dirty words for Elron deemed to be obscene, sexist, racist or otherwise offensive. Even Elron's European sales director, Pat Dunne, was taken aback by the scope of the list. He said: "When I first saw the list, I was amazed. There were mild words like dimwit but some of the severe entries, I couldn't even guess what they referred to. The list includes slang from every English-speaking country."

4.   Many employers claim they are cracking down on inappropriate Internet use to ensure workers are productively engaged. Xerox fired dozens of employees last year for spending excessive time on the Internet gambling and viewing pornography. Yet some employers say the best way to curtail malingering is not by intrusive monitoring but by effectively motivating workers.

5.   While ensuring worker productivity is a factor, a major impetus for policing Internet use comes from the desire to create a 'safe' and 'non-threatening' atmosphere in the workplace. The New York Times Company fired 23 employees for violating its e-mail policy. The e-mail policy specifies that "computer communications must be consistent with conventional standards of ethical and proper conduct, behavior, and manners and are not to be used to create, forward, or display any offensive or disruptive messages, including photographs, graphics and audio materials." In a climate where business feels the need to be seen to be responsible, initiating an e-mail policy to protect the sensibilities of the more sensitive employees presents them in a favourable light. It also fends off the possibilities of being faced with legal actions such as the one launched by some of Chevron's female employees.

6.   Employers have always supervised their workforce to ensure the work was done. They see the monitoring of Internet and e-mail use as a natural extension of that supervision even though that is an invasion of the privacy of communications between their workers. Supervision, while sometimes resented, is accepted by workers as an inevitable fact of life, even though the nature of that supervision is becoming more intrusive.

7.   It used to be the case that so long as the work was done, relations between workers were not a concern of management. Workers were free to swap stories, anecdotes or tell a few dirty jokes so long as they knuckled down when the pressure was on. They enjoyed an informal association that was their property and free from management intervention. Employer attempts to breach that were met with resistance.

8.   In a market economy workers are effectively the property of their employer. Most employers would recoil in horror from such a stark definition of their relationship with their workers. The preferred terminology is that of 'partnership' and 'enhancing the experience of work.' Yet intervention by employers such as monitoring e-mails indicate that workers are very much the property of their employers, being sucked into a role of dependency upon them.

9.   In June 1997, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that workers have a "reasonable expectation" of privacy in making and receiving telephone calls at work. It was assumed that this applied equally to e-mails and other communications at work. Some organisations contend that because they own the computer resources on which e-mail messages are transmitted, they should have an unconditional right to control and monitor the contents of those messages. In effect, employers assume the right to dictate how their workers can communicate with each other.

10.   The private sphere is under attack throughout society. Intervention in people's lives is becoming acceptable, as they are increasingly seen as unable to manage

their own lives without outside assistance. The workplace is no exception to this increased intervention and erosion of privacy. From monitoring e-mail and Internet use to forcing workers to undergo counselling to resolve problems in the workplace, the notion of workers having a right to privacy and autonomy in the workplace is being eroded.

11.   Workers resisting the monitoring of their e-mail, insisting on their right to a private sphere in the workplace and refusing counselling are seen as a problem by employers. By simply defending their right to privacy and trying to preserve a sense of inviolable personal integrity in the workplace, they are seen as being obstructive.

12.   More acceptable are workers who do not stand up for their right to privacy and who willingly accept interventions such as e-mail monitoring as a necessary price for freedom from harassment. In short, workers who are prepared to surrender a greater proportion of their sense of selfhood.

13.   The inevitable consequence of monitoring e-mails is an erosion of freedom of expression in the workplace. Workers knowing their e-mails are being monitored exercise self restraint in what they say. Whether it is self censorship practised by workers fearful of censure, or direct intervention to terminate an offending message, freedom of expression suffers.

14.   This is a situation where technology, far from having the potential to be used as a liberatory tool, is instead being used to erode people's privacy and their sense of self, denying them basic freedoms. Yet there is an alarming degree of acquiescence in this erosion of privacy. The informal and often creative relationships between workers which provided a degree of autonomy and independence are increasingly being sacrificed in the name of 'safety' and 'freedom' from harassment.

Internet Freedom News aims to provide both analysis of and comment on events involving free speech and censorship on the web.

Virtual Corporations, Human Issues & Information Technology

Training & Development Magazine's Interview with
Dr. Yogesh Malhotra
Founding Chairman and CKO
BRINT Institute

What do virtual companies do about trust? Are managers worried about supervising employees, and if so, how do they go about "monitoring" off-site workers?

The key issue is not "monitoring" itself, but if it is of any relevance given the key purpose of the virtual organization. Given that the key objective of virtual corporation is to provide for ultimate adaptability and flexibility, monitoring may not be of much use. The key emphasis is on [what is generally termed as] empowerment and self-control of the employees. In this new model of work, the employees are expected to make decisions and judgments based on the demands of the specific situations. Given greater responsibility of the employees, such organizations are focusing on developing the judgmental ability of such employees. For instance, some companies such as Nordstrom have only one line policy manual: "Use your best judgments under all situations." The human resource department and the supervisor's responsibility is to facilitate the realization of what good judgment is. Similarly virtual corporations such as Verifone emphasize a lot on sharing the corporate philosophy with their remote employees. This issue is related to the company's broad vision and strategic goals which are communicated through the shared culture and common corporate values. What I am referring to is the 'clan control,' as first termed by William G. Ouchi.

I am not suggesting that the virtual organizations cannot use technology for "monitoring" employee's work. The sophistication of technology permits managers, if they prefer, to monitor every single key stroke or phone call of the employees, and many companies are doing so. However, employees complain of being spied upon 24-hours a day and generally complain of stressful consequences. The traditional "monitoring" by means of 'observing' every move of the employee may not necessarily be conducive to the agility that is the key objective of the virtual corporation.

One may compare the above description with bringing up of a teenager by the parent. One could either use the technology (such as pagers, cell phones, etc.) for continuously monitoring each movement of the child, or one may rely more on the sharing of the family values.

The key issue in both cases is keeping the channels of communication open for allowing the exchange of issues related to values and then hoping that the values are strong enough to drive out the need for continuous 'monitoring' in the traditional sense. Also, given the demands of changing knowledge requirements, the managers may not be in the best position to keep pace with the quick changes in the field and would need to entrust the related decision-making to the employees.

Many companies are doing so by encouraging continuous communication, and having

occasional face-to-face group interactions for sharing of experiences and ideas - either in person or using technologies such as video conferencing.

How do employees feel about losing real human contact? How can a virtual organization build community?

This is a cru cial issue that most companies are attempting to address. Industry reports suggest that in many cases, employees who are used to working in social work settings may encounter anxiety and stress when they work remotely or from home offices. One pertinent issue is of continuous monitoring by the employer which may drive the employee toward burnout resulting from round-the-clock electronic access.

The loss of human contact is being balanced by maintaining continuous communication as well as by holding occasional face-to-face meetings for information sharing and support. In several cases the human contact at the workplace is being replaced with increased contact with clients and customers in the field. In the case of telecommuters who work from home, loss of human contact at workplace poses a different set of problems. However, many employees prefer this option if they need to take care of their children, homes or relatives. Also, some such cases may offer the option of flextime, i.e., the employees may determine their own work hours while working from home. The relevant issue is that of self-discipline and self control and companies can certainly benefit by helping the employees realize these.

Answering the issue of community is critical for the virtual organiz ation to operate effectively. The issue of cultural infrastructure and information sharing needs to be addressed with the same urgency as the issue of technological infrastructure. As suggested earlier, a culture characterized by 'clan control' needs to precede the development of a virtual community. The key question is if it is possible within a corporate setting. Based on my participation in several virtual networked communities, I am optimistic about the feasibility of building a community around shared values and common issues. The key issue is not about the latest information technologies, but if those technologies are used within, and for facilitating, a culture of information sharing, relationship building and trust.

Glossary:
CKO: A Chief Knowledge Officer is a senior executive who is responsible for ensuring that an organization maximises the value it achieves through one of its most important assets - knowledge. Although only a few companies have people with this explicit title, those with similar responsibilities include Director of Intellectual Capital, Director of Innovation. Note - a CKO is not simply a relabelling of the CIO (Chief Information Officer) or MIS (Management Information System) Director. The role of a CKO is broader and different.