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Big Brother can watch me work any day

By Lucy Kellaway
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Last week the *Financial Times* published a scary story about how technology is being used by companies to spy on us at work. It described how sensors can be easily and cheaply hidden in name badges and office furniture to track where we are, to whom we talk, and in what tone of voice. HR departments can find out how long we take to get to work and how we behave when we get there.

I shuddered as I read the article – as did most FT readers. Nineteen Eighty-Four is upon us, they commented online. Totalitarianism is rampant! Privacy is down the plughole!

Yet on closer inspection, the arrival of Big Brother in the corporate world is not necessarily such a bad thing. Being constantly monitored by invisible devices might sound frightening but I'm not sure it is any more so than being monitored infrequently by visible human beings.

Under the present arrangement, we are observed in a haphazard and unscientific way by superiors who may well have made up their minds about us already, based on not much evidence at all. Sod's Law decrees that when you do something good, no one notices but the minute you do something bad you get caught. I remember one boss who, once in a blue moon, would walk around the office; whenever he crept up behind me I was invariably writing a shopping list or was on the phone to my mum. Such surveillance didn't improve my behaviour, though it did increase my sense of injustice. To have been monitored all the time – which would have put the shopping list in the context of otherwise diligent behaviour – would have been a vast improvement.

In most offices a raft of mainly pointless, cumbersome tools are used to assess performance, including "competency matrices", appraisal interviews and psychometric testing. Together they are so ineffective that according to a delightful piece of research by the University of Catania, companies would be no worse off promoting people at random.

If we are in favour of meritocracy, we should also be in favour of anything that helps us measure merit more accurately. While the data collected by the new sensors are almost certainly too crude to offer much help now, I see no reason why in time (and probably quite soon) we will not have worked out exactly which behavioural quirks are the key to high (or low) performance, and found a decent, objective way of measuring them.

Steelcase, which makes some of the sensors so loathed by FT readers, hopes that one day they will not only be used to monitor juniors but in boardrooms too. While it is hard to see directors willingly turning these tools upon themselves, it would be a terrific idea if they did. At the moment, monitoring of boardroom behaviour is hopeless – outsiders periodically come in to observe, but such are the political sensitivities it is almost impossible for them to make a difference.

If, by contrast, all directors were wired up, anyone who banged on indefinitely, lowering the pulses of their boardroom colleagues, would be faithfully fingered by the technology. Equally, the person who made the odd remark that made everyone sit up in their seats would also be marked out. Knowing that the devices were there, and knowing the object of the exercise was to make incisive, controversial points, would improve board meetings no end.

It is objected that monitoring behaviour in offices would kill trust and spontaneity, making robots of us all. But so long as everyone knew they were being monitored and understood what for, I don't see why it should be such a terrifying idea – except perhaps for those who bully, shout at and harass others – and who have been getting away with it.

Far from making work less civilised, the arrival of Big Brother could make it more so. Office life could become more transparent and less political. And managers would be freed from having to play the role of policeman all day and allowed to get on with the more important role of helping people do a better job.

Some problems would need resolving. For a start extensive monitoring could be illegal. You would also have to ensure that workers were not able to subvert the process – and that wicked managers were not busily manipulating the data for their own devious ends. Above all, for the system to work, you would need to have some faith in the regime that implemented it.