Therapist
Accrued “idle time”

Copywriter
Refused monitoring

Hospice Chaplain
Chased “points”

Shift Manager
Feared “going red”

Softwar
Makes
tool

Editor in Chief
Submits screenshots

Product Manager
Devised “focus scores”

Operations Associate
Craves more tracking

Research Analyst
Took a bathroom break

Marketing Executive
Rated on “intensity”

The Rise of the Worker Productivity Score

Across industries and incomes, more employees are being tracked, recorded and ranked. What is gained, companies say, is efficiency and accountability. What is lost?

By Jodi Kantor and Arya Sundaram
Produced by Aliza Aufrichtig and Rumsey Taylor
Aug. 14, 2022

A FEW YEARS AGO, Carol Kraemer, a longtime finance executive, took a new job. Her title, senior vice president, was impressive. The compensation was excellent: $200 an hour.

But her first paychecks seemed low. Her new employer, which used extensive monitoring software on its all-remote workers, paid them only for the minutes when the system detected active work. Worse, Ms. Kraemer noticed that the software did not come close to capturing her labor. Offline work — doing math problems on paper, reading printouts, thinking — didn’t register and required approval as “manual time.” In managing the organization’s finances, Ms. Kraemer oversaw more than a dozen people, but mentoring them didn’t always leave a digital impression. If she forgot to turn on her time tracker, she had to appeal to be paid at all.

“You’re supposed to be a trusted member of your team, but there was never any trust that you were working for the team,” she said.

Since the dawn of modern offices, workers have orchestrated their actions by watching the clock. Now, more and more, the clock is watching them.

You’re Being Tracked

As you read, a simulation will show you aspects of what it’s like to be tracked by productivity software. At the end of the article you’ll be graded for your “performance.” The results will not be stored. More about this.

Status: Active

What other workplace practices should we know about? Share your experiences.

Give this article 1.3K

IN LOWER-PAYING JOBS, the monitoring is already ubiquitous: not just at Amazon, where the second-by-second measurements became notorious, but also for Kroger cashiers, UPS drivers and millions of others. Eight of the 10 largest private U.S. employers track the productivity metrics of individual workers, many in real time, according to an examination by The New York Times.

Now digital productivity monitoring is also spreading among white-collar jobs and roles that require graduate degrees. Many employees, whether working remotely or in person, are subject to trackers, scores, "idle" buttons, or just quiet, constantly accumulating records. Pauses can lead to penalties, from lost pay to lost jobs.

Some radiologists see scoreboards showing their "inactivity" time and how their productivity stacks up against their colleagues'. At companies including J.P. Morgan, tracking how employees spend their days, from making phone calls to composing emails, has become routine practice. In Britain, Barclays Bank scrapped prodding messages to workers, like "Not enough time in the Zone yesterday," after they caused an uproar. At UnitedHealth Group, low keyboard activity can affect compensation and sap bonuses. Public servants are tracked, too: In June, New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority told engineers and other employees they could work remotely one day a week if they agreed to full-time productivity monitoring.

Architects, academic administrators, doctors, nursing home workers and lawyers described growing electronic surveillance over every minute of their workday. They echoed complaints that employees in many lower-paid positions have voiced for years: that their jobs are relentless, that they don't have control — and in some cases, that they don't even have enough time to use the bathroom. In interviews and in hundreds of written submissions to The Times, white-collar workers described being tracked as "demoralizing," "humiliating" and "toxic." Micromanagement is becoming standard, they said.

But the most urgent complaint, spanning industries and incomes, is that the working world's new clocks are just wrong: inept at capturing offline activity, unreliable at assessing hard-to-quantify tasks and prone to undermining the work itself.

Megan Polney
Therapist

Ms. Polney's **keyboard activity was closely monitored** when she worked for a division of UnitedHealth Group. She **sometimes accrued "idle time" while discussing cases** with colleagues, affecting her chances of getting bonuses and promotions.

Christie Hemm Klok for The New York Times

UnitedHealth social workers were marked idle for lack of keyboard activity while counseling patients in drug treatment facilities, according to a former supervisor. Grocery cashiers said the pressure to quickly scan items degraded customer service, making it harder to be patient with elderly shoppers who move slowly. Ms. Kraemer, the executive, said she sometimes resorted to doing “busywork that is mindless” to accumulate clicks.

“We’re in this era of measurement but we don’t know what we should be measuring,” said Ryan Fuller, former vice president for workplace intelligence at Microsoft.

The metrics are even applied to spiritual care for the dying. The Rev. Margo Richardson of Minneapolis became a hospice chaplain to help patients wrestle with deep, searching questions. “This is the big test for everyone: How am I going to face my own death?” she said.

ALLINA HEALTH

The Rev. Margo Richardson
Hospice chaplain

Each morning, Ms. Richardson and her colleagues **had to project how many “productivity points” they would accumulate** during the day’s work. **But death defied planning.**

Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

But two years ago, her employer started requiring chaplains to accrue more of what it called “productivity points.” A visit to the dying: as little as one point. Participating in a funeral: one and three-quarters points. A phone call to grieving relatives: one-quarter point.

As these practices have spread, so has resistance to what labor advocates call one of the most significant expansions of employer power in generations. TikTok videos offer tips on outsmarting the systems, including with a “mouse jiggler,” a device that creates the appearance of activity. (One popular model is called Liberty.) Some of the most closely monitored employees in the country have become some of the most restive — warehouse workers attempting to unionize, truckers forming protest convoys.

But many employers, along with makers of the tracking technology, say that even if the details need refining, the practice has become valuable — and perhaps inevitable.

Tracking, they say, allows them to manage with newfound clarity, fairness and insight. Derelict workers can be rooted out. Industrious ones can be rewarded. “It’s a way to really just focus on the results,” rather than impressions, said Marisa Goldenberg, who ran a division of the company Ms. Kraemer joined, and said she used the tools in moderation.

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Some employers are making a trade: “If we’re going to give up on bringing people back to the office, we’re not going to give up on managing productivity,” said Paul Wartenberg, who installs monitoring systems for clients including accounting firms and hospitals.

But in-person workplaces have embraced the tools as well. Tommy Weir, whose company, Enaible, provides group productivity scores to Fortune 500 companies, aims to eventually use individual scores to calibrate pay. “The real question,” he said, “is which companies are going to use it and when, and which companies are going to become irrelevant?”

Status: Active

Add your ID photo to prove you’re really here. Not required, and we’re not keeping it, but you’ll get extra points.

Captured on Camera

MS. KRAEMER, the finance executive, thought she had seen it all. Years after working at Enron, the energy giant turned business blowup, she and former colleagues still held reunions to commemorate what they had been through. But she had never encountered anything like the practices of ESW Capital, a Texas-based group of business software companies.

She and her co-workers could turn off their trackers and take breaks anytime, as long as they hit 40 hours a week, which the company logged in 10-minute chunks. During each of those intervals, at some moment they could never anticipate, cameras snapped shots of their faces and screens, creating timecards to verify whether they were working. Some bosses allowed a few “bad” timecards — showing interruptions, or no digital activity — according to interviews with two dozen current and former employees. Beyond that, any snapshot in which they had paused or momentarily stepped away could cost them 10 minutes of pay. Sometimes those cards were rejected; sometimes the workers, knowing the rules, didn’t submit them at all.

While the tracker was on, “you couldn’t choose those bathroom or coffee moments — you just had to wing it," she said.

Matthew Phillp
Copywriter

Mr. Phillp **lost a freelance job after refusing to install Time Doctor**, software that would have taken screenshots of his work. He said he found it intrusive — and potentially misleading, since he often works on paper.

Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

Though Ms. Kraemer didn't know it, that software had been created with a sense of promise about the future of the workplace.

It was part of a bold plan for streamlining and "redefining the way people work," as one of the creators put it. Office settings were choked with unnecessary interruptions, they believed, and constrained by geography from hiring the best talent worldwide. Smartphones and their constant pings were a growing threat to concentration.

If technology could optimize productivity, everyone would benefit, the executives said. The company would accomplish more. Workers would perform better, then log off to live their lives.

To carry out this vision, ESW deployed a firm called Crossover, founded in 2014, to hire and manage workers. Wages were high, and benefits sparse: Nearly everyone would be contractors, using their own computers. The executives adapted an existing tracker into WorkSmart, the software that placed Ms. Kraemer and others under a dome of electronic supervision.

The system drew adherents, because the productivity gains were remarkable. Goofing off was excised. In interviews, former supervisors described having newfound powers of near X-ray vision into what employees were doing other than working: watching porn, playing video games, using bots to mimic typing, two-timing Crossover by programming for other businesses, and subcontracting their assignments out to lower-paid workers.

Other employees, they said, became more efficient. "Once you see those metrics, those insights, something changes: You realize how much you waste doing nothing, or just multitasking and not accomplishing stuff," said Federico Mazzoli, a co-creator of WorkSmart. Some overseas workers said the intrusions were worth the U.S. salaries that enabled them to buy homes or start businesses.

But Ms. Kraemer, like many of her colleagues, found that WorkSmart upended ideas she had taken for granted: that she would have more freedom in her home than at an office; that her M.B.A. and experience had earned her more say over her time.

Workdays grew longer for her and others, in part because offline work didn't count, but also because it was nearly impossible to work online with unwavering focus. Taking time to mull or

CROSSOVER

Federico Mazzoli
Product Manager

Mr. Mazzoli helped create software used to monitor white-collar workers and pay them only for the minutes they were actively working. He later **questioned the accuracy of his creation and called it dangerous**.

Tali Kimelman for The New York Times bantering with colleagues turned out to be necessary to both doing her job and getting through the day, even if those moments went unpaid.

“You have to be in front of your computer, in work mode, 55 or 60 hours just to get those 40 hours counted and paid for,” Ms. Kraemer said. Though WorkSmart allowed payment requests for offline work, employees said managers did not always encourage them. (Executives from ESW and Crossover did not reply to repeated requests for comment including written questions about whether any of these practices have since been updated. But Crossover defends its practices on its website, saying that its “‘Fitbit’ of productivity” spurs motivation, accountability and “remote freedoms.”)

Two years after helping to build WorkSmart, Mr. Mazzoli started using it. He became awash in anxiety and doubtful about its accuracy. “Some days you were just moving the cursor around just for the sake of it,” he said. The tool was powerful but dangerous, he concluded. (He left the company a year later.)

MCDONALD'S

Terrence Wise
Shift manager

When Mr. Wise worked at a Kansas City McDonald’s, he said, stations were closely monitored and employees feared “going red,” or not moving quickly enough.

Chase Castor for The New York Times

Crossover’s reputation as an employer began to slide, with online reviews that warned against working there. The company heard so many complaints about the camera trained on each worker that they removed it as a default feature, according to Mr. Mazzoli. Ms. Kraemer left ESW and sued Crossover for unpaid wages for work that its system didn’t track. The case was settled for an amount she is barred from disclosing.

But WorkSmart’s creators had adopted an idea that was going mainstream. Human resources, once reliant on more subjective assessments, was becoming more of an analytics business. Employers had always sought to get the most out of employees, and some fields had long recorded billable client hours, but this was different. “The people data revolution, predicted for years, has finally arrived,” proclaimed a 2018 Deloitte report.

Software makers competed to deliver employee ratings, app-activity reports and color-coded charts showing who was doing what. Even software that wasn’t designed for productivity surveillance contributed to it. Microsoft Teams, introduced in 2017 and taken up by hundreds of millions of people, signaled which users were “active” (green dot) or “away” (yellow). Salesforce, the leading marketing, sales and customer service program, logged emails sent and phone calls made to customers. At financial firms, monitoring software set up for compliance

UNION TEST PREP

reasons also served up insights on how employees spent their time.

Upwork, a freelance marketplace now used by podcast producers, accountants and hundreds of thousands of other skilled workers, offered a time-tracking feature similar to WorkSmart's that took screenshots during every 10-minute billing window. (This is no coincidence: The tracker that inspired WorkSmart is now part of Upwork.) Freelancers could try to explain screenshots showing moments of inactivity, but as with WorkSmart, some said they submitted only the unblemished ones, in effect forgoing pay for some of their labor.

Dora Potts
Editor in Chief

Ms. Potts said she was **in favor of the screenshots that Upwork, a freelancer marketplace, took at random intervals during her work** for a testing preparation service. **"It keeps you honest," she said.**

Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

The arrival of the pandemic, spurring businesses to keep tabs on workers at home, hastened a shift that was already underway. As more employers adopted the tools, more workers shared Ms. Kraemer's experience: The software was warping the foundations of time and trust in their work lives.

In the spring of 2020, Patrick Baratta graduated from the University of Virginia and began working remotely for AlphaBrook, which provides research on government contracting. Soon the company began gauging its workers' productivity using a program called Monitask, according to Mr. Baratta and several former colleagues.

Once, he said, a manager asked why his score had dropped during a particular 10-minute increment. "Sometimes I have to use the bathroom," he replied. (Matthew Hastings, AlphaBrook's founder and chief executive, said the company "would never assess an employee over just 10 minutes of their time.") In interviews and written submissions to The Times, workers across a variety of jobs — pharmaceutical assistants, insurance underwriters, employees of e-commerce companies — also said productivity pressure had led to problems with bathroom breaks.

ALPHABROOK

Patrick Baratta
Research Analyst

Mr. Baratta, who had recently graduated from college, found his computer use tracked so closely that managers inquired about a period when he had been in the bathroom.

Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Some companies that adopted monitoring tools during the Covid-19 shutdown maintained them even after returning to work in person. CoStar Group, a Washington-based real estate data company where a friend of Mr. Baratta took a job, continued keeping intricate records of how employees spend their time. (One report viewed by The Times had over 20 entries in a single hour of an employee's day.) CoStar said that those numbers were not used as stand-alone tools and that a better measurement was the monthly rankings of individual employee output displayed on screens in the office.

Larger, more established companies are taking similar steps. UnitedHealth Group has 350,000 employees, a perch high on the Fortune 500 list and annual revenues of hundreds of billions of dollars. It also has strict systems for measuring “idle time” that some employees say are deeply flawed.

Jessica Hornig, a Rhode Island social worker who supervised two dozen other UnitedHealthcare social workers and therapists seeing patients with drug addiction and other serious problems, said their laptops marked them “idle” when they ceased keyboard activity for more than a short while. They were labeled derelict during sensitive conversations with patients and visits to drug treatment facilities.

“This literally killed morale,” Ms. Hornig said. “I found myself really struggling to explain to all my team members, master’s-level clinicians, why we were counting their keystrokes.”

In recent years, she said, the scores have become even more consequential: On performance evaluations, social workers were rated 1 to 5 based on the amount of time they were digitally engaged — numbers that affected compensation. Ms. Hornig said her team spent hours each week piecing together alternate records but had trouble keeping up without compromising core parts of their job.

Other UnitedHealth employees described similar problems. For Linda Eusebi, who works on insurance letters from her home in Garden Grove, Calif., compensation is tied to “idle time.” At the end of the workday when her company-issued computer is shutting down, it sometimes gets stuck in “idle” mode all night, throwing off her numbers. (She said her managers, aware of the problems but unable to fix them, began reminding her and others to jiggle their mice during meetings and training sessions.)

Isaac Sorensen, a spokesman for Optum, a division of UnitedHealth Group, acknowledged that the company monitored employees but declined to say how many, and said it considered several factors in evaluations. “We know there is no single measure to fully assess team productivity or individual performance,” he said.

For frustrated employees, or for companies navigating what to disclose to workers or how to deploy metrics in pay or firing decisions, the law provides little guidance. In many states, employers have “carte blanche in how to implement these technologies to surveil workers,” said Ifeoma Ajunwa, a law professor at the University of North Carolina.

Many of today’s workplace regulations, including the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, were written long before “bottom performer” dashboard displays were conceivable. A New York law that took effect this spring requires employers to disclose the type of information they collect. But efforts to enact a similar rule in California stalled amid opposition from business groups.

“The technology is just growing and improving so quickly,” said Brian Kropp, the chief of research for Gartner’s human resources practice. “It’s moving faster than employees realize it is, and a whole lot faster than government can regulate it.” Investment in new workplace technologies has been soaring,

ESW CAPITAL

Ritu Chaturvedi
Vice President of Marketing

Ms. Chatuvedi said she was unfazed by heavy tracking, including **screenshots taken throughout the day**. “There are people who are honest and people who are not and there’s no way to tell the difference,” she said.

Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

according to Jason Corsello, a venture capitalist, who called "performance management" one of the fastest-growing categories, with an eightfold increase in funding in the last five years.

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But the march toward ever-tighter monitoring is also encountering some limits. Some companies have rejected the approach outright, and earlier this year, Amazon quietly eased back on the best-known, and most criticized, productivity metric in the American workplace.

For years, Amazon's "time off task" policy recorded warehouse workers' every pause and resulted in the firing of highly praised employees after one bad day. With unionization efforts underway on Staten Island and new California regulations on warehouse metrics, Amazon reformulated its rules. The company still calculates every worker's "rate," or pace. But the term "time off task" has been retired, according to Kelly Nantel, a spokeswoman, and managers have been directed to look only into "idle" periods longer than 15 minutes. The updated rules, she said, are meant to recognize that employees may need to confer with a colleague or spend a few extra minutes in the restroom — in other words, to better reflect people's natural behavior and cadences.

Status: Active

'Spiritual Care Drive-Bys'

IN THE FIRST MONTH after joining the group of hospice chaplains in Minnesota, the Rev. Heather Thonvold was invited to five potlucks. To endure the constant sorrow of the work, the more than a dozen clergy members ministered to one another. Sometimes the cantor in the group played guitar for his mostly

Protestant colleagues. There was comfort in regarding their work as a calling, several of them said.

In August 2020, the productivity revolution arrived for them in an email from their employer, a nonprofit called Allina Health.

“The timing is not ideal,” the message said, with the team already strained by the pandemic. But workloads varied too widely, and “the stark reality at this point is we cannot wait any longer.”

MARKETING AGENCY

Sara Cooksey
Operations Associate

Ms. Cooksey craves greater tracking, she said, because she suspects that a colleague on her team is doing far less than she is. “There’s no accountability when we’re working from home,” she said.

Eva Marie Uzcategui for The New York Times

Allina was already keeping track of productivity, but now there would be stricter procedures with higher expectations. Every morning the chaplains would share on a spreadsheet the number of “productivity points” they anticipated earning. Every evening, software would calculate whether they had met their goals.

But dying defied planning. Patients broke down, canceled appointments, drew final breaths. This left the clergy scrambling and in a perpetual dilemma. “Do I see the patients who earn the points or do I see the patients who really need to be seen?” as Mx. Thonvold put it.

At the chaplains’ meetings, they shared their apprehension. The type of attention and care that had drawn them to this work could impede their point totals, they told their managers. The dying were often lonely, and the difficulty of travel during the pandemic left them more isolated. Some asked questions with no short answers, like “What’s it like to die?” Ms. Richardson said.

“People’s entire life experiences come into play,” she continued. “You get it all: the tears, the anger, the guilt.”

TERAMIND

Isaac Kohen
Vice President for Research & Development

Mr. Kohen’s company offers surveillance for compliance reasons — but also “live montage” and “latest snapshot” views of employees’ screens.

Scott McIntyre for The New York

Times

Sometimes the chaplains sacrificed points, risking reprimand or trying to make them up later. But their jobs depended on meeting the standards. So they shifted whom they saw when, the time they spent and the depth of their relationships with the dying, some said. Group settings like nursing homes were rich sources of points. Single patients in homes dotting the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul area were not.

“This is going to sound terrible,” Mx. Thonvold said, “but every now and again I would do what I thought of as ‘spiritual care drive-bys’” to rack up points. If a patient was sleeping, “I could just talk to the nurse and say, ‘Are there any concerns?’ It counted as a visit because I laid eyes.”

But last summer, Ms. Richardson and Mx. Thonvold came to the same conclusion: The metrics prevented them from fulfilling their calling. They quit.

Allina’s director of hospice, Lisa Abicht, said in a statement that the company was “extremely proud of the high-quality and compassionate hospice care” its teams provide. Since the productivity changes, she said, employees’ goals and performance were more transparent, workloads were more balanced, and “patient satisfaction scores” and “employee sustainable engagement” scores were up.

The productivity project, she said, had been a success.

What other workplace practices should we know about?

Do you have a story to share about the workplace, particularly the employee-employer relationship? *

0 words

How (and Why) We Created Our Tracking Software Simulation

The simulation is intended to give readers a sense of what productivity software is capable of and what it’s like to interact with. We drew on dozens of productivity programs and descriptions from hundreds of workers. Many sent us images of the tools in action, as well as internal guidelines and reports.

Our simulation uses metrics found in

Has there been anything you've been surprised to find out that your employers know about you, such as a search for a new job?

0 words

What more, if anything, should we understand about this kind of tracking? Do you know of instances in which workers were fired for faulty metrics or ones that weren't discussed, or about other impact on workers' lives?

0 words

Do you have specific examples of how technology is transforming the workplace or employer-employee relationship?

0 words

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First and last preferred, please. We will not publish your name without contacting you first.

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Where do you live? *

City or town, and state, please. We will not publish your location without contacting you first.

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real monitoring tools, including time on page, idle and active time, and webcam photos. Not every program has all the features seen here (and some have far more).

Unlike tracking software, the simulation will not store your results: They will disappear when you leave the page.

Credits

Julie Tate contributed research. Photo editing by Beth Flynn. Additional photography by Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times. Emily Erdos and Sona Patel solicited experiences from workers.

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