INTERNET MONITORING OF WORKERS INCREASING, SURVEY FINDS

Employees' Internet activities at work increasingly are subject to surveillance by their employers, according to a study of employers’ electronic monitoring and surveillance policies and procedures conducted by the American Management Association (AMA), and the ePolicy Institute. Primary concern about employee abuse of the Internet is inappropriate Web surfing, according to the report, which notes that 66 percent, up from 62 percent of employers in 2005, say they monitor employees’ Internet connections.

Based on the responses of 304 employers, the survey examines employer surveillance of their workers' use of the Internet, email, and telephones as well as the types of monitoring practices in use and the action taken against employees who misuse these business tools. Since 2001, the percentage of employers using software to block connections to inappropriate Web sites has grown 27 percent to 65 percent of all surveyed organizations. Of employers blocking some Web access, 96 percent say they prevent employees from visiting adult sites with sexual, romantic, or pornographic content, and 61 percent block game sites. Half of employers that set up blocks say they want to restrict employees from social networking sites, 40 percent are concerned about entertainment sites, 27 percent about employee use of shopping or auction sites, 21 percent about their use of sports sites, and 18 percent have concerns about employee visits to external blogs.

Various approaches to computer monitoring include tracking the content of what employees do, the keystrokes entered, or the amount of time spent at the keyboard, as practiced by 45 percent of responding employers. Another 43 percent of employers store and review workers' computer files. In addition, 12 percent monitor the blogosphere to see what has been written about their organizations, and 10 percent of employers monitor social networking sites. Of the 43 percent of organizations monitoring employee email, 73 percent use technology tools for the task and 40 percent assign an individual to read and review email manually.

Among the 28 percent of employers that fired workers for misusing email, 64 percent dismissed the workers because they violated company policy, 62 percent for using inappropriate or offensive language, 26 percent for excessive personal email use, and 22 percent for breaking the organization’s confidentiality rules. Among the 30 percent of employers that dismissed workers for misuse of the Internet, 84 percent cited employee viewing, downloading, or uploading of inappropriate or offensive content, 48 percent for violating company policy, and 34 percent for excessive personal use.

In contrast, just 6 percent of employers fired employees for misuse or private use of office telephones, even though 45 percent of employers monitor the time employees spend on calls and the numbers called. Another 16 percent record employee telephone conversations and 9 percent monitor voice mail messages. Most employers notify employees of telephone (84 percent) and voice mail (73 percent) monitoring.

Only 8 percent of employees reported tracking company vehicles through use of assisted global positioning or global positioning systems (GPS), and an even smaller percentage (3 percent) use GPS to monitor cell phones. Nearly half (48 percent) of companies use videotape surveillance to control theft, violence, and sabotage, and only 7 percent use videos to track workers' job performance. When bosses use antitheft video surveillance, 78 percent tell their employees they are doing so, and 89 percent of organizations let employees know if their on-the-job performance is being monitored by video.

AMA recommends that employers educate workers on company expectations through annual training. “Employers need to do more than hand over a written policy,” according to Manny Avramidis, AMA senior vice president of global human resources.

The survey is titled, 2007 Electronic Monitoring & Surveillance Survey.