

AI-SPY

As artificial intelligence enters the workplace, work could become fairer – or more oppressive.

The potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to transform the way we work is enormous. It can already be used at every stage of production to improve efficiency and save costs. Now some companies are also starting to use AI to monitor their employees while they work. How will this affect the workplace? Will work become fairer or more oppressive?

Surveillance at work isn't new. Factory workers have always clocked in and out and managers can already see what staff do on their computers, but AI goes further than this. Amazon, for example, has a wristband that tracks hand movements of warehouse workers and uses vibrations to tell them when they are not working hard enough. And a tech start-up, Humanyze, sells smart badges that can track employees around the office and monitor how well they interact with colleagues. There are few laws that control how information is collected at work and employees usually consent to surveillance when they sign their employment contract. So, where does this all lead?

Let's start with the benefits. AI should improve productivity. Managers will be able to assess how quickly employees accomplish tasks. Employees will gain, too. AI can check that workers are wearing safety equipment and that nobody has had an accident on the factory floor.

Machines are impartial and they can help ensure that pay rises and promotions go to the people who deserve them. They can also identify problems such as sexual harassment and racism at work.

Yet AI's benefits will also have drawbacks. Surveillance can feel Orwellian. Veriato, a software firm, monitors exactly when, how often and what employees use their computers for to assess how committed they are to the company. Other companies monitor how much time employees spend on breaks. They can also use AI to search through employees' social media profiles – a very sensitive issue, particularly because people are questioning how much Facebook and other tech giants know about their private lives.

Three principles should guide the spread of AI in the workplace. First, the data should be anonymous where possible. Microsoft, for example, has a product that shows individuals how they manage their time in the office, but only gives managers the information in aggregated form. Second, the use of AI should be transparent. Employees should be told what information is being collected. Finally, companies should be open to individuals' requests to see their own data at any point of their career.

The advance of AI in the workplace needs to balance privacy and performance. A fairer, more productive workforce is a prize worth having, but it shouldn't dehumanise employees. Otherwise, the choice in the future may be between being replaced by a robot or being treated like one!

(source: *The Economist*)

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