The dark side of smart machines

by Rachel Ranosa

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Surveillance in the workplace is nothing new.

However, with the advent of intelligent machines, surveillance has gone beyond simple timekeeping and employee profiling. Big data and artificial intelligence are uncovering patterns of human behavior in the workplace that have never been closely monitored and analyzed until now.

"AI makes ubiquitous surveillance worthwhile because every bit of data is potentially valuable," wrote Alexandra Suich Bass, US technology editor at The Economist.

Suich Bass authored the special report GrAIt expectations, which sheds light on the impact of AI on HR, among other areas of business, as AI begins to influence industries outside of Silicon Valley.

'Orwellian' surveillance

Modern-day workplace surveillance may feel Orwellian, Suich Bass noted. Organizations today turn to a variety of metrics to keep an eye on workers, from the time they spend on breaks to the content of their social media profiles.

Even keyboard strokes can become a signal of low productivity or suspicious activity. US software maker Veriato, which claims to detect insider threats, scan emails, record keystrokes and capture screenshots of a monitored PC. Veriato uses machine learning to differentiate between normal and abnormal activity.

"Using AI, managers can gain extraordinary control over their employees," Suich Bass said.

Amazon's employee tracking bracelet is another example. The US retailer owns two patents for a wristband that will not only pinpoint a warehouse worker's whereabouts but also monitor

their hand movements in real time. Intended as a time-saving device, the tracker is designed to buzz if a worker is headed for the wrong item.

Monitoring happiness

While the wristband is only a concept for now, Amazon still has other ways of monitoring employees.

In 2017, the company began rolling out a daily Q&A system that appears on an employee's computer screen at the start of their day.

The topics cover work-related concerns such as employee satisfaction. However, a dozen current and former employees who spoke to CNBC question just how anonymous and useful the data is.

Meanwhile, the 'happiness meter' developed by Japanese conglomerate Hitachi monitors a person's physical activity to determine mood levels at work. Hitachi set about quantifying workers' happiness by using wearable sensors. One client found the morale of teams dropped when young employees were made to spend more than an hour in meetings.

A quick hello every day to a colleague can also be used to measure social interaction. Humanyze, a people analytics software company in Boston, has developed an ID badge equipped with sensors, accelerometer, and two microphones that listen in on employee conversations.

Humanyze says the mics do not record the content of chats, but only perform voice processing, picking up on tone, volume, and speed. All data is encrypted and available only as team-level statistics to managers.

"A fairer, more productive workforce is a prize worth having, but not if it shackles and dehumanizes employees," Suich Bass said. "Striking a balance will require thought, a willingness for both employers and employees to adapt, and a strong dose of humanity."

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