

## **You've Got Mail . . . And the Boss Knows: A Survey by the Center for Business Ethics of Companies' Email and Internet Monitoring**

*W. Michael Hoffman, Laura P. Hartman and Mark Rowe  
Center for Business Ethics, Bentley College*

Business and Society Review (2003)

### **OBJECTIVE:**

This survey was created to understand the extent to which a company monitors its employees' use of its communication facilities like the use of internet and electronic mail, their means of such monitoring and their reasons for doing so.

### **METHODS USED:**

The survey had two parts and was conducted over the spring and summer of 2002. The first part involved a questionnaire submitted to 192 companies which were Ethics Officer Association (EOA) sponsoring partners. The second part consisted of interviews with selected corporate ethics officers and senior managers representing a wide range of industry sectors. The response rate was 54%. Ten interviewees were selected for a follow-up interview in order to provide data of a qualitative nature.

### **KEY FINDINGS:**

- All respondents provide their employees with access to internet and electronic mail.
- 92% of the companies (survey respondents) monitor all avenues of office communication (Email, Telephone, Internet, etc).
- To notify employees about the monitoring policy, 81% of the companies use a clause in the company's code of ethics while 72% publish a policy manual regarding the same.
- 86% of the companies were okay with employees using email for family matters while 84% and 72% respondents were fine with their employees browsing news websites and 401(k) matters through the internet.

- 89% of the companies block certain websites not considered appropriate to be used through company provided internet. 44% respondents have gone even further by using keywords to block information on the internet.
- The frequency of monitoring of employee usage of email for ‘good reasons’ only (i.e. monitoring employee email only if there is a good reason to do so) was 34%, while 26% of the companies did it all the time. 2% of the companies never monitor employee email.
- The decision regarding when and whom to monitor is largely taken by senior members of the HR department (57%), the ethics officer (55%) or the general counsel (53%) of the company.
- The IT department (69%) is responsible for checking email and internet usage of a company’s employees.
- 25% of the companies do not have adequate measures to prevent abuse of the monitoring system. Only 57% of the companies have written guidelines and policies regarding monitoring.
- 63% of the companies allow their ethics officers to have access to the monitoring data. 58% give access to their security department.
- None of the respondents thought that monitoring was unethical.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The survey results suggest that monitoring of company email is widespread in the American corporate culture but it is not publicized well enough. To maintain an atmosphere of trust and cooperation between employees and their managers, it is important to strike a balance between monitoring for legitimate purposes and employee privacy.

Further information about this study can be found at:

<http://www.bentley.edu/newsroom/latest-headlines/youve-got-mailand-boss-knows>