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# Data pioneers watching us work

By Hannah Kuchler



In a back street in San Francisco's start-up dominated SoMa district, a rapidly growing business is busy studying how millions of employees behave each day. Its computers know in real time why a worker was hired, how productive they are and can even follow them as they move to a new job.

Evolv is a leader in the nascent Quantified Workplace movement, where big data analytics companies are springing up to measure how we work. "Every week we figure out more things to track," says Max Simkoff, Evolv's co-founder and chief executive, who claims it can help improve productivity by at least 5 per cent in two-thirds of jobs.

More than half of human resources departments around the world report an increase in the use of data analytics compared with three years ago, according to a recent survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit. But many employees are still blissfully unaware of how information they may deem private is being analysed by their managers.

For its part, Evolv analyses more than half a billion "employee data points" from across 13 countries, seeking to identify patterns across companies and industries. These data points range from how often employees interact with their supervisor to how long it takes a worker to get to the office.

Evolv's clients use them to help guide their hiring decisions, as well as to evaluate an employee's performance throughout his or her career.

The company has so far focused on customer-facing industries such as retailers and call centres. One client is Kelly, an employment agency. It says it has seen a 7 per cent improvement in employee efficiency across the board by incorporating Evolv's insights into its hiring policy.

Novo1, a US company that runs customer call centres and has more than 2,000 employees, identified the characteristics of its most successful call operators and hired more people like them. This cut job interviews down to 12 minutes from an hour, reduced average call time by a minute and slashed attrition by 39 per cent.

Another pioneering outfit is Sociometric Solutions, which puts sensors in name badges to discover social dynamics at work. The badges monitor how employees move around the workplace, who they talk to and in what tone of voice.

One client, Bank of America, discovered that its more productive workers were those allowed to take their breaks together, in which

they let off steam and shared tips about dealing with frustrated customers.

The bank took heed and switched to collective breaks, after which performance improved 23 per cent and the amount of stress in workers' voices fell 19 per cent.

Ben Waber, Sociometric Solutions co-founder and chief executive, thinks the badges can be deployed far beyond sales and customer service. He sees big opportunities in pharmaceuticals, for instance, where productivity is hard to measure because new drugs might emerge only once in a decade: "The rest of the time, they have no idea."

Another company, Steelcase, which puts sensors in office furniture and buildings to see how workers interact, thinks the real opportunity for workplace monitoring is far from the call-centre floor – in opaque creative departments and even boardrooms, where time is especially precious.

#### Sushi test for surgery

US hospitals are using a game called Wasabi Waiter to select surgeons in a leap forward for data analytics in recruitment.

Set in a cartoon sushi restaurant, the game promises to measure decision-making and communication skills, among other attributes.

Its maker, the Silicon Valley-based Knack, profiled what makes a successful surgeon above and beyond medical expertise and experience.

Professor Kenneth Egol, vice-chair of orthopaedic surgery at the NYU Medical Center Hospital, is using it to select resident surgeons.

Swamped by applicants who are top of their class at good universities, he wanted to identify those who were also hardworking team players. "Sometimes you have people who are super intelligent and it all came very easy, they didn't have to work. It is hard to be a good resident if you don't work."

David Lathrop, its director of research and strategy, says the sensors are now so cheap they can be put "practically everywhere", arguing that employees could benefit by tracking their own performance.

Improving the productivity of top executives "has a disproportionate effect on the company", he adds.

Advocates say quantifying the workplace is especially useful in areas where there are often culture clashes: such as cross-border teams and acquisitions.

For example, clients of Polycom, a video conferencing company, can already replay their recorded meetings. Stuart Monks, its group vice-president for technology and architecture, wants to go further and let customers analyse that information.

Mr Monks says within Polycom, the HR department has been able to use the data to ascertain that a group in one continent was not understanding a team in another.

Not everyone is convinced that the growing use of technology to monitor workers' productivity offers an unequivocal improvement, however.

Teresa Amabile, a professor and director of research at Harvard Business School, says it could be "very positive" or "very negative" depending on the existing workplace culture.

Monitoring can work if the teams, departments or whole offices using the software or devices have what she calls "a high degree of psychological safety".

If people feel able to experiment, potentially fail and learn from those lessons, then they can be motivated by gaining a better understanding of how they spend their days.

But she warned that the technology was still in its early days and could be "too crude" an instrument to rely on. "There is definitely a danger of seeing technology as a silver bullet," she says.

Lew Maltby, president of the US National Workrights Institute, says electronic monitoring could be a "very valuable tool" for employers, by providing evidence for sexual harassment suits or assessing productivity in data entry jobs, for example.

But he says most employees "haven't got a clue" about the extent to which their emails are already monitored, or about the information their employer can access from their work computer and smartphone.

Employees may have little in the way of legal grounds for challenging an extension of this data gathering. He says there was a spate of legal cases in the US a few years ago about the monitoring of work computers and employees lost every one of them.

"No employee has ever won an invasion of privacy case based on an employer monitoring their computer," he says.

Even those who are involved in the growing industry believe there needs to be more discussion about when and how the data are used. Professor Andrew Knight from Washington University in St Louis works with data from both Evolv and Sociometric Solutions to study workplace behaviour.

But he thinks constant monitoring is a "scary image for the future" that could "remove some of the authenticity of those [workplace] relationships".

Steelcase's Mr Lathrop may be busy thinking up innovative places in which to slip sensors, but he does consider the potential impact on employees. In the wake of the Edward Snowden affair, he says people may have been temporarily put off by what they see as an infringement of their privacy. But he thinks that will fade.

"It is easy to paint a creepy scenario about this," he says. "But it is also possible to create quite a positive scenario – where people benefit directly."

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