

Mathew Dickerson **Axxis Technology**

Big brother coming to a job near you

Staff productivity levels are increasingly questioned and employers are looking for solutions that monitor their activities

Do you remember the 1984 debut single from R&B artist, Rockwell? “I always feel that somebody’s watchin’ me; And I have no privacy. I always feel that somebody’s watchin’ me; Is it just a dream?” The merger of Marshal and 8e6 (to form the highly original name Marshal8e6) made me think more of where the IT world is with monitoring and surveillance and made me wonder if more and more employees feel like Rockwell.

Anecdotally I have never seen more clients asking us to help them investigate what their staff are doing. If I would have suggested monitoring software to my clients seven to 10 years ago, I would have received zero response. Our clients are now approaching us and asking us to provide solutions that will allow them to monitor what their staff are doing. Sometimes with very interesting results.

One client had three partners in their organisation. After they had noticed some unusual traffic they asked us to load some software and see what was happening. The report was interesting – it showed that one of the partners was the main culprit. I left the report with the organisation and left them to their internal discussions, but to this day the partner in question still swears black and blue that someone must have logged on with his details. Not surprisingly, the activity stopped after the meeting of the partners!

Rather than look at the anecdotal information on offer, I went looking for some surveys and external information to support my feeling.

The change in the employment scenario is overwhelming. I found that employers are not just blocking and monitoring web and email traffic, but using phone taps and GPS tracking to increasingly combine technology and policy to manage productivity and minimise litigation and other risks. Twenty-eight percent of employers in

a recent US survey have fired workers for email misuse including violation of a company policy, offensive language and excessive personal use. Forty-three percent of all companies monitor email, with 73 percent using technology tools to automatically monitor email and 40 percent assign an individual to manually read and review email. If an employer is going to assign themselves to read through emails, I recommend to only attempt it if you have very thick skin. Remember that off-hand comment you made to a staff member two years ago? No? Well the staff member you said it to can and they have been writing about it in emails for the past two years.

With 15 percent of employers having battled workplace lawsuits triggered by employee email, it may soon be almost compulsory to monitor employee email. Consider some high-profile cases in the US pointing out the damage that email can do. Persecutors used email trails to build their case against Ken Lay, Enron founder and ex-CEO, who is now serving a 165-year prison sentence. Former Boeing CEO Harry Stonecipher was forced to resign after his extramarital affair with a colleague came to light after sexually explicit emails sent via the company’s email system were revealed. And Henry Blodget, a former analyst with Merrill Lynch, has been barred for life from the securities industry after praising stocks in public but criticising them in his emails.

And do you remember the Jamie Oliver cookbook hoax from several years ago? The story was that supposedly an employee of Penguin Books forwarded on a Word copy of Jamie’s ‘new’ book, *Naked Chef 2*, to a mate and then it spread over the Internet like wildfire. Penguin used its email monitoring system to support its employees and prove that no employee of Penguin sent such an email – with an additional minor point being the simple fact that there was

“ It may soon be almost compulsory to monitor employee email ”

no *Naked Chef 2* book at the time.

In addition to email dismissals, 30 percent of employers have dismissed employees for incorrect use of the Internet including viewing offensive content and excessive personal use. It would seem that employers are primarily concerned with inappropriate web surfing – especially with the prevalence of social networking sites, blogs, game sites and, of course, adult sites. As a result, 66 percent of employers monitor Internet connections and 65 percent use software to block connections to inappropriate websites. This is a 27 percent increase over the past five years.

In addition to the obvious monitoring of email and Internet, 45 percent of employers monitor time spent on the telephone and the numbers called, while 16 percent record phone conversations and nine percent monitor employee voicemail. Six percent of employers have dismissed staff for misuse or private use of office phones. I still believe there is a fine line between trust and sapping morale – I had an accounting client many years ago who had a sticker attached to each telephone in the office. “All private calls to be paid for at front desk – 25c.”

The next huge growth area is GPS tracking. At the moment, only eight percent use GPS to track company vehicles and three percent use GPS to monitor mobile phones. With the emergence of inexpensive and simple technologies such as the Telstra WhereiS EVERYONE service, I can see a lot more employers taking advantage of GPS mobile tracking – although there is some room for improvement.

Most of the research numbers are from the US. I would believe the number of companies here currently monitoring activity to be lower so that means there is a real opportunity for resellers.

Tell me your staff monitoring tales at mathew.dickerson@smallbusinessrules.com.