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Applied Ergonomics in Telework: A Sociotechnical and Organizational Psychology Analysis of Workplace Digital Surveillance and Worker Wellbeing Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examines how digital workplace surveillance embedded within remote and hybrid work systems shapes employee morale, organizational trust, and job satisfaction. Grounded in a socio-technical ergonomics framework, the research conceptualizes monitoring technologies not as neutral administrative tools but as structural design elements that recalibrate autonomy, accountability, and relational dynamics. The rapid normalization of telework during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of algorithmic oversight systems, transforming managerial visibility and redefining performance metrics. Yet, limited empirical attention has been devoted to how these systems are subjectively experienced, particularly among younger workforce cohorts. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Generation Y and Generation Z employees working under digitally monitored telework conditions, the study explores how surveillance practices influence perceptions of autonomy, fairness, psychological safety, and engagement. The analysis identifies core themes reflecting tensions between efficiency and trust, transparency and intrusion, and compliance and intrinsic motivation. The findings contribute to socio-technical ergonomics scholarship by illuminating how oversight infrastructures can either support or destabilize sustainable and adaptive work environments.

Keywords: digital workplace surveillance; supervision; telework; socio-technical ergonomics; organizational trust; employee morale; job satisfaction; Generation Y; Generation Z

1. Introduction

Ergonomics, when conceptualized through a socio-technical framework, concerns the intentional alignment of technological systems, organizational governance, and human capacities to produce resilient and adaptive work environments [1]. Within this orientation, employee monitoring technologies cannot be regarded as neutral administrative tools. Rather, they function as structural mechanisms that recalibrate autonomy, accountability, and relational trust. As remote worker digital surveillance becomes increasingly embedded in contemporary organizations, its implications must be examined not only in terms of operational efficiency, but also with respect to psychological safety, engagement, and long-term well-being.

Advances in data analytics now allow organizations to capture and algorithmically to interpret behavioral information in real time, offering detailed visibility into patterns of activity and performance [2]. While such capabilities are frequently framed as productivity



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enhancers, they simultaneously reshape the architecture of managerial oversight. The integration of monitoring technologies into remote and hybrid work systems alters how supervision is exercised and how performance is defined. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, these systems transform the interaction between workers and organizational control structures, with consequential effects on morale, engagement, and perceptions of trustworthiness [2].

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation by normalizing remote work at scale and converting telework from a discretionary arrangement into a structural necessity [3,4]. As physical visibility diminished, many organizations adopted digital tracking tools to reconstitute oversight [5]. These tools record keystroke activity, distinguish between active and idle time, analyze software usage, and monitor communications, sometimes incorporating screenshot capture or webcam activation [5]. Commercial platforms such as Teramind, ActivTrak, InterGuard, Sneek, and Hubstaff enable granular behavioral analytics and automated compliance alerts [5]. Although these systems promise enhanced coordination and risk mitigation, their deployment extends managerial reach into digitally mediated workspaces.

Crucially, the ergonomic implications extend beyond efficiency gains. Continuous digital oversight may heighten self-regulatory pressure, narrow perceived autonomy, and strain relational trust. Evidence suggests that opaque implementation of monitoring systems can erode morale and foster frustration, whereas transparent communication and informed consent mitigate perceptions of intrusion [5]. Transparency, therefore, is not merely a legal safeguard; it is a design principle essential to maintaining equilibrium within socio-technical systems.

This study proceeds from the premise that digital surveillance technologies are embedded components of organizational design that shape employee experience in consequential ways. Accordingly, the central objective of this research is to examine how digital workplace monitoring influences workplace morale, organizational trust, and job satisfaction within contemporary remote and hybrid work environments.

2. Problem Statement

The rapid shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a structural reconfiguration of work systems rather than a gradual adaptation of flexible practices [3,6]. Unlike voluntary telework arrangements documented in earlier scholarship [3,7,8], pandemic-era remote work was implemented under conditions of urgency, limited preparation, and constrained employee choice. Organizations were compelled to preserve productivity and continuity while simultaneously redesigning workflows, communication patterns, and supervisory mechanisms. In many cases, this redesign included the rapid adoption of digital workplace surveillance tools intended to restore managerial visibility in the absence of physical proximity.

From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, such transitions represent systemic interventions that alter not only where work occurs, but also how authority, accountability, and trust are operationalized. For example, a financial services firm that previously relied on in-office supervision may have implemented activity-logging software to monitor remote analysts' computer usage. While this approach addresses managerial concerns regarding productivity, it also reshapes the relational architecture of the organization by substituting technological oversight for direct interpersonal coordination. The ergonomic concern is whether such substitutions enhance system performance and well-being or inadvertently introduce new psychosocial strains.

Evidence suggests that the expansion of digital monitoring is neither marginal nor inconsequential. Approximately 26% of HR leaders report deploying software to track

remote employees' computer activity, communications, phone usage, and even location data [5]. Simultaneously, 73% of employees indicate that such monitoring would erode organizational trust, and 43% express concerns regarding privacy risks [5]. These statistics reveal a measurable divergence between managerial control strategies and employee perceptions of legitimacy.

This divergence is not merely perceptual; it has operational implications. Trust functions as a critical system resource, influencing collaboration, discretionary effort, and adaptive capacity. When employees interpret monitoring practices as excessive or opaque, morale may decline, and engagement may become compliance-driven rather than intrinsically motivated. For instance, a remote employee aware that idle time is automatically flagged may prioritize maintaining visible activity over engaging in reflective problem-solving. Such behavioral adjustments may satisfy metric-based evaluations while diminishing deeper cognitive contributions. From a socio-technical standpoint, the misalignment between monitoring intensity and employee acceptance constitutes a genuine organizational risk.

The relevance of this issue extends beyond the immediate crisis context. Projections indicate that 25–30% of formerly office-based employees will continue operating within remote or hybrid arrangements [9]. These models institutionalize digital mediation as a permanent feature of work systems. Yet, existing research has largely examined remote work in voluntary contexts or has focused on traditional forms of involuntary change, such as job displacement or relocation [10–12]. Comparatively limited empirical attention has been devoted to the intersection of mandated remote work and intensified digital surveillance.

This gap is consequential because digital monitoring technologies are not ancillary administrative tools; they constitute embedded components of organizational design. Their presence influences how performance is measured, how autonomy is experienced, and how trust is constructed or eroded. In hybrid environments, for example, differential monitoring practices between on-site and remote employees may generate perceptions of inequity, further complicating morale dynamics. Without systematic investigation, organizations risk normalizing surveillance infrastructures without understanding their long-term socio-technical effects.

The broader problem confronting contemporary organizations is the redefinition of work within digitally mediated systems characterized by reduced physical co-presence and expanded technological oversight [13]. The more specific problem, and the focus of this research, is the limited empirical understanding of how digital workplace surveillance embedded within remote and hybrid configurations affects workplace morale, organizational trust, and job satisfaction.

These constructs are not peripheral indicators of sentiment; they are foundational determinants of resilient system performance. Morale influences collective efficacy, trust underpins cooperative coordination, and job satisfaction shapes retention and sustained engagement. From an ergonomics viewpoint, optimizing human–technology interaction requires balancing accountability and security with psychological well-being and relational stability.

Accordingly, this study examines how the structural integration of digital monitoring technologies within remote and hybrid work systems shape employee morale, workplace trust, job satisfaction, psychological security, perceptions of respect, and organizational commitment. The study frames digital surveillance not simply as a productivity or cybersecurity tool, but as a socio-technical design feature that alters how employees interpret leadership, autonomy, recognition, and professional value [1]. This framing is important because monitoring systems do more than observe work; they change the relational meaning

of work. When employees experience surveillance as broad, unexplained, or disconnected from actual performance problems, they often interpret it as an organizational signal that leadership presumes distrust rather than professional competence.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how Generation Y and Generation Z employees experience digital workplace surveillance within telework and hybrid work environments. The central research problem was that organizations increasingly use monitoring technologies to restore managerial visibility in remote work settings, yet limited empirical understanding exists regarding how employees interpret these systems and how those interpretations shape morale, organizational trust, job satisfaction, autonomy, and engagement [2,5,13]. This problem is especially important because digital surveillance is not merely a technical tool for measuring productivity; it functions as an embedded feature of organizational design that redefines accountability, control, and the employee–supervisor relationship [1]. Therefore, the study focused on the lived experiences of five Generation Y and five Generation Z workers to understand how surveillance was internalized at the individual level and how it influenced the psychological and relational conditions necessary for sustainable telework.

The study was situated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which transformed telework from a discretionary flexibility arrangement into a structural necessity for many organizations [3,4]. This transition was structural rather than incremental because it changed not only where employees worked, but also how work was coordinated, supervised, measured, and legitimized. Organizations had to redesign communication patterns, workflow expectations, performance evaluation systems, and managerial oversight practices under conditions of urgency and limited preparation. In many cases, digital monitoring tools became the mechanism through which organizations attempted to replace physical supervision with technological visibility [5]. This shift mattered because surveillance systems introduced during crisis conditions risked becoming normalized without adequate attention to their long-term effects on autonomy, trust, and well-being.

The study specifically centered Generation Y and Generation Z employees because these cohorts are highly relevant to the future of digitally mediated work. As younger workforce cohorts, they are positioned to spend a significant portion of their careers in remote, hybrid, platform-mediated, and algorithmically managed work environments. Their interpretations of surveillance, fairness, transparency, autonomy, and respect are likely to influence future expectations for organizational leadership, retention, engagement, and technology governance. By examining how these workers experience digitally monitored telework, the study addresses a critical gap in the literature: how emerging and established younger professionals make meaning of surveillance practices that have become normalized within contemporary work systems. This focus linked the research purpose to a broader socio-technical question: how organizations can design oversight systems that support accountability without undermining the human conditions that make remote work sustainable.

4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a growing tension between organizational control and employee legitimacy in digitally monitored telework environments. As remote and hybrid work continued beyond the pandemic, organizations have increasingly depended on monitoring tools to maintain coordination, compliance, cybersecurity, and productivity [5,9]. However, the use of surveillance technologies creates a potential misalignment between managerial intentions and employee interpretations. Leaders may view

monitoring as a rational response to reduced physical visibility, while employees may experience the same monitoring as distrust, intrusion, or devaluation. This divergence is consequential because morale, trust, and job satisfaction are not peripheral attitudes; they are core system resources that influence collaboration, discretionary effort, adaptive capacity, and retention.

The study contributes to socio-technical ergonomics by demonstrating that digital surveillance has to be evaluated as a work-system design issue rather than as a narrow technology adoption issue. Within a socio-technical framework, effective work systems require alignment among technology, organizational policy, leadership practice, and human psychological needs [1]. Surveillance technologies disrupt this alignment when they privilege traceable activity over meaningful contribution or when they use behavioral data without sufficient transparency, proportionality, or employee voice. For example, an employee who is evaluated by idle-time indicators may begin prioritizing visible activity over reflective problem solving, even when reflection is essential to high-quality knowledge work. This illustrates why the significance of the study extends beyond privacy concerns: surveillance reshapes how employees define productivity, professionalism, and trust.

The study is also significant for organizational leaders who are designing future telework policies. Generation Y and Generation Z employees are particularly important because their experiences with surveillance are likely to shape future expectations for digital work culture. If these employees associate telework with autonomy, fairness, and outcome-based evaluation, remote and hybrid models could support engagement and retention. If they associate telework with constant observation, algorithmic suspicion, and limited managerial trust, remote work could become a source of psychological strain rather than flexibility. The practical implication is that organizations need to avoid treating surveillance as a default substitute for leadership. Instead, monitoring practices need to be transparent, purpose-limited, participatory, and connected to legitimate organizational risks. In this way, the study offers a basis for designing oversight systems that balance technological capability with psychological well-being, relational stability, and sustainable performance.

5. Nature of the Study

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design because the research sought to understand meaning, perception, and lived experience rather than to test causal relationships or measure predefined variables. A quantitative design could have identified patterns among surveillance, satisfaction, trust, or turnover intention, but it would have been less suited to explaining how employees interpreted surveillance within the context of their daily work lives. Phenomenology was appropriate because digital monitoring was not experienced only as a technical process; it was also experienced as a social and psychological condition that shaped how employees felt trusted, respected, secure, and valued. Therefore, the methodological goal was to identify the essential themes that characterized digitally monitored telework as experienced by Generation Y and Generation Z employees.

6. Defining Flexible Workplace Structures

Remote work, telework, and hybrid work represent distinct yet overlapping configurations of organizing labor outside the traditional centralized office, each carrying different structural and psychosocial implications [14–17]. Remote work functions as the broadest category, referring to arrangements in which employees perform their duties outside a primary organizational location using digital communication and collaboration technologies. The defining characteristic is geographic separation rather than schedule rigidity. In fully remote models, employees may never report to a physical office, operating instead within distributed teams across cities or countries. Remote-first organizations go further

by designing workflows, meetings, and documentation practices around virtual participation as the default rather than the exception. Other variations include temporary remote arrangements implemented in response to emergencies and remote-optional systems in which employees determine their preferred location. These models require strong digital infrastructures and clear outcome-based performance systems, as managerial visibility is reduced and coordination relies heavily on asynchronous communication [14–17].

Telework, by contrast, is a more structured and policy-bound form of remote work typically associated with formal agreements between employee and employer [14–17]. It generally maintains a clear attachment to a central office while permitting work from home or another approved location on designated days. Part-time telework arrangements, for example, may allow employees to work remotely two days per week while remaining on site for the remainder. Situational telework permits occasional remote work under specific conditions, such as caregiving needs or temporary disruptions. Because telework is frequently embedded within government or corporate policy frameworks, it tends to emphasize accountability mechanisms and eligibility criteria. The structured nature of telework distinguishes it from fully location-independent remote work, as organizational oversight and expectations of office presence remain formally codified [14–17].

Hybrid work represents an intentional integration of in-office and remote work within a single role, combining physical and digital environments in a coordinated manner [14–17]. Unlike fully remote arrangements, hybrid systems preserve the office as a central node of collaboration while distributing portions of work across home or satellite locations. Fixed hybrid models require employees to be physically present on specific days, whereas flexible hybrid systems grant employees discretion in determining their schedule. Team-based hybrid approaches coordinate presence at the group level to maintain collaboration, while role-based hybrid structures differentiate work location requirements according to job function. This blended model introduces unique coordination challenges, including the risk of proximity bias and unequal access to informal information networks, requiring deliberate organizational design to ensure fairness and cohesion [14–17].

Collectively, these arrangements differ in degree of autonomy, policy structure, and spatial integration, and these differences have material implications for supervision, performance evaluation, and organizational culture [14–17]. Fully remote environments necessitate outcome-based management and robust digital communication systems, while telework relies on formalized oversight within partially remote schedules. Hybrid systems demand careful orchestration of social interaction and technological mediation to avoid fragmentation between on-site and remote employees. Understanding these distinctions is essential for analyzing how digital workplace monitoring, employee engagement, and well-being may vary across work configurations, as structural design fundamentally shapes the employee experience.

7. Explaining Workplace Digital Surveillance

Workplace digital surveillance represents a structural transformation in how organizations coordinate, evaluate, engage, and control labor within technologically mediated environments and remote working settings. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] conceptualize this phenomenon as the technologically enabled tracking and monitoring of workers, a practice that expanded dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, this expansion cannot be understood solely as an operational adjustment; rather, it constitutes a reconfiguration of power, visibility, and control within contemporary work systems. By embedding surveillance technologies into the architecture of organizational processes, firms have recalibrated the balance between managerial

oversight and employee autonomy, affecting both essential workers and those engaged in remotely performable tasks [18].

A defining feature of workplace digital surveillance is its technological embeddedness within core workflows. Monitoring tools are not peripheral add-ons but are integrated directly into communication platforms, task management systems, and productivity dashboards [18]. This integration transforms technology from a facilitative instrument into an evaluative infrastructure. Ergonomically, such integration reshapes task demands and behavioral expectations in which employees are required not only to perform work, but also to generate traceable, quantifiable activity. The work system thus becomes datafied, privileging observable digital outputs over tacit knowledge, relational labor, or creative cognition.

Intrusiveness further distinguishes contemporary digital surveillance from earlier supervisory practices. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] describe forms of “intrusive monitoring” and “excessive supervision” that exceed traditional managerial oversight. Advanced methods include scanning emails, calculating time spent within collaborative applications, capturing screenshots, and maintaining persistent camera activation [18]. Such practices extend managerial gaze into spaces historically insulated from continuous observation. From a socio-technical standpoint, this degree of visibility intensifies cognitive and emotional load, as employees must regulate not only performance outcomes, but also the appearance of constant activity. The resulting self-monitoring may alter risk taking, collaboration patterns, and willingness to experiment; core determinants of adaptive system performance.

Another critical dimension involves the expansive data ecology generated by these systems. Surveillance technologies collect, store, and algorithmically analyze large volumes of behavioral metadata; what Aloisi and de Stefano [18] describe as “digital exhaust.” These data traces can be mined to infer personality characteristics, predict future behavior, and shape prescriptive managerial interventions. Within a socio-technical framework, this capacity introduces asymmetrical informational power. Algorithms extrapolate correlations with limited human supervision, linking surveillance to broader regimes of workforce analytics and algorithmic governance [18]. The shift from human judgment to automated inference redefines accountability structures in which decisions concerning workload allocation, evaluation, or remuneration may increasingly rest on opaque computational models rather than deliberative managerial reasoning [1].

The comprehensiveness and immediacy of digital surveillance further distinguish it from analog supervision. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] characterize contemporary monitoring as “omnipresent, real-time and relentless,” exceeding the limits of human observation and extending beyond the boundaries of the physical workplace. This temporal and spatial expansion disrupts traditional distinctions between work and non-work domains. From an ergonomic perspective, such boundary erosion has implications for recovery cycles, psychological detachment, and long-term well-being. When monitoring infrastructures operate continuously, employees may experience diminished capacity for restorative disengagement, thereby affecting morale and sustained performance.

Finally, digital surveillance amplifies managerial control across the employment life-cycle. Technological systems now inform recruitment screening, performance evaluation, workload distribution, and compensation determinations [18]. This amplification enhances administrative efficiency but also centralizes decision authority within algorithmically mediated structures. Socio-technical ergonomics emphasizes that resilient systems depend on calibrated distributions of control, in which autonomy and oversight are balanced to support trust and engagement. Excessive centralization of surveillance-driven control risks destabilizing this equilibrium, potentially undermining morale and organizational commitment.

Workplace digital surveillance, as conceptualized by Aloisi and de Stefano [18], is not merely a technological upgrade in managerial practice. It also represents a systemic redesign of the social–technical interface, characterized by embedded monitoring infrastructures, heightened intrusiveness, expansive data extraction, algorithmic governance, real-time omnipresence, and amplified managerial authority. Evaluating its implications requires moving beyond efficiency metrics to examine how these structural shifts influence power relations, cognitive load, recovery capacity, and the sustainability of organizational trust.

8. Pandemic-Induced Occupational Polarization and Surveillance Intensification

Aloisi and de Stefano [18] characterize the COVID-19 transition as a “new great polarization,” distinguishing between essential and remotable occupations. This bifurcation did more than reorganize labor spatially; it redistributed exposure to risk and redefined how managerial control was exercised through digital surveillance. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, the pandemic functioned as a large-scale systems stress test, revealing how technological monitoring infrastructures were deployed differently across occupational categories while simultaneously expanding managerial authority.

Essential workers, including healthcare personnel, logistics staff, food production workers, custodial teams, and delivery drivers, continued in-person labor despite elevated health risks [18]. These roles, disproportionately occupied by women, migrants, and lower-income individuals, were often framed as socially indispensable yet structurally vulnerable. Surveillance technologies introduced in these contexts were frequently justified as protective mechanisms. For example, proximity-tracking wearables and thermal imaging devices were implemented to detect potential viral exposure. However, such tools also introduced granular oversight of worker movement and behavior, extending managerial visibility beyond traditional supervision. In practice, a warehouse worker wearing an ultrasonic bracelet designed to enforce physical distancing may experience both enhanced safety and intensified behavioral scrutiny. The ergonomic challenge lies in determining whether such systems genuinely optimize safety and workflow coordination or primarily amplify unilateral control.

Remotable occupations refer to jobs that can be performed effectively outside a centralized workplace, typically from home or another remote location, using digital communication and information technologies. At its core, a remotable occupation is defined not by industry, but by task structure [18]. If the essential duties of a role can be executed through a computer, telecommunications systems, and digital collaboration platforms without requiring physical presence, the occupation is considered remotable [18].

Conversely, employees in remotable occupations, such as consultants, academics, administrators, and executives, shifted rapidly to home-based work [18]. Although this transition reduced exposure to physical health risks, it prompted the widespread adoption of digital monitoring systems intended to re-establish managerial oversight. Practices including email surveillance, activity tracking, screenshot capture, and continuous video presence became increasingly common. Framed as mechanisms to safeguard productivity, these tools simultaneously reinforced an “always clocked in” culture that eroded boundaries between work and personal life. For example, mandatory webcam visibility throughout the workday may inhibit psychological detachment and contribute to cognitive fatigue. While essential and remotable workers operated under different conditions, both groups experienced intensified forms of surveillance that reshaped autonomy and work experience.

A common denominator across these groups was the normalization of what Aloisi and de Stefano [18] describe as a COVID-induced panopticon; an unprecedented escalation of monitoring capabilities that expanded managerial prerogatives. From a systems design perspective, this expansion often lacked counterbalancing mechanisms such as participatory governance, transparency standards, or collective negotiation. As a result, the pandemic accelerated a cultural shift toward comprehensive oversight without proportionate institutional safeguards.

9. Augmented Managerial Power and Algorithmic Governance

The rapid adoption of digital monitoring technologies during the pandemic significantly recalibrated power dynamics within organizations. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] argue that managerial prerogatives were amplified through the widespread deployment of data-driven oversight tools. Managers acquired enhanced capacity to organize, track, and discipline labor through algorithmic systems that operated in real time. Unlike traditional supervisory observation, these technologies aggregated and analyzed behavioral data at scale, producing actionable metrics that informed decision making.

This shift toward algorithmic governance often occurred under conditions of limited transparency. Many monitoring tools were implemented swiftly, with minimal explanation regarding data collection scope, analytic criteria, or decision pathways [18]. In such environments, employees' ability to understand or contest evaluative processes was constrained. For example, a remote analyst flagged by automated productivity software may have limited insight into how the system calculated "inactivity," reducing opportunities for meaningful dialogue. From a socio-technical ergonomics standpoint, opacity undermines trust and weakens system resilience by eroding perceived fairness.

For essential workers, technocratic monitoring replaced or supplemented direct managerial observation. Health-status applications, medical questionnaires, and biometric tracking systems transformed bodies and movements into data points [18]. While these measures addressed public health imperatives, they also introduced continuous behavioral quantification. For remote workers, surveillance manifested through digital exhaust analysis; counting time in collaborative platforms, capturing screen activity, and enforcing constant connectivity. These practices collectively shifted managerial control from episodic supervision to persistent data-driven oversight.

10. Autonomy, Agency, and the Risk of Habituation

The comprehensiveness and immediacy of pandemic-era surveillance raised concerns regarding worker autonomy and agency. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] suggest that real-time, relentless monitoring may constrain creative contributions and abstract problem solving by privileging measurable conformity. When performance metrics emphasize visible activity over outcome quality, employees may adjust behavior to satisfy algorithmic criteria rather than organizational mission. This recalibration of effort, from intrinsic problem solving to metric compliance, has ergonomic implications for innovation capacity and cognitive engagement.

Additionally, the crisis context contributed to what Aloisi and de Stefano [18] term passive acquiescence. Faced with health uncertainties and economic instability, employees often accepted monitoring as a condition of safety or job security. Over time, such acceptance risks habituation, normalizing surveillance practices that might otherwise be contested. From a socio-technical perspective, normalization without deliberation may entrench asymmetrical power structures, reducing opportunities for participatory system redesign.

To illustrate, consider two remote organizations implementing identical monitoring software. In one, leadership transparently communicates data usage, invites employee input, and restricts analytics to workload balancing. In the other, monitoring remains opaque and is directly tied to disciplinary action. While the technological infrastructure is identical, the socio-technical configuration differs markedly. The former may enhance coordination and trust; the latter may erode morale and psychological safety.

11. Toward Resilient Surveillance Governance

The pandemic accelerated what Aloisi and de Stefano [18] describe as a structural mutation in monitoring power, rendering it more comprehensive and instantaneous than analogue predecessors. From an ergonomics standpoint, the central question is not whether digital surveillance will persist, but how it will be governed. Sustainable system performance requires balancing accountability, safety, and privacy through deliberate organizational design.

Resilient surveillance governance would incorporate transparency, proportionality, and participatory oversight mechanisms. Rather than relying solely on unilateral managerial authority, organizations might establish cross-functional committees to review monitoring practices, clarify data retention policies, and assess psychosocial impacts. Such measures align technological capability with ethical and cultural considerations, fostering trust while preserving operational effectiveness. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified occupational polarization and catalyzed the expansion of digital workplace surveillance across both essential and remotable roles [18]. Although the modalities differed, the overarching trend was an augmentation of managerial control through data-driven systems. A socio-technical ergonomics approach underscores that the long-term viability of these practices depends on integrating technological oversight with structures that protect autonomy, transparency, and well-being.

12. Involuntary Organizational Change in Digitally Monitored Work Systems

Empirical scholarship on involuntary organizational change consistently links imposed transitions, such as job loss, relocation, or forced retirement, to psychological strain, diminished morale, and identity disruption [10–12,19]. These findings underscore a central principle, which explains that when individuals perceive change as externally imposed rather than self-directed, adjustment processes become more complex and emotionally charged. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, involuntary change is not merely an event, but also a systemic perturbation that alters the equilibrium between human agency and organizational structure.

While prior research has examined involuntary displacement and its psychological sequelae, comparatively little attention has been given to the experience of traditional office-based employees compelled to work remotely under conditions of intensified digital surveillance. This omission is consequential. Involuntary remote work does not simply relocate labor spatially; it also frequently introduces new monitoring infrastructures that reshape visibility, accountability, and managerial control. For example, an employee who previously operated within a trust-based office culture may, upon transition to remote work, encounter mandatory activity-tracking software or automated performance dashboards. Such changes can recalibrate perceptions of autonomy and fairness, influencing morale and adaptive capacity.

Notably, not all outcomes of involuntary change are uniformly negative. Recent research [20] found that forced remote work did not uniformly disrupt conventional work expectations, with some participants reporting stable or even improved experiences when

core job elements remained intact. This finding complicates dominant narratives portraying involuntary change solely as detrimental. A socio-technical lens encourages a more nuanced interpretation: outcomes depend on how technological tools, organizational policies, and cultural norms are integrated. When digital monitoring is introduced alongside supportive communication, clear role expectations, and participatory feedback mechanisms, employees may experience continuity rather than rupture. Conversely, abrupt implementation of surveillance technologies without contextual framing may amplify perceptions of loss and diminish engagement.

An ergonomically informed analysis therefore requires moving beyond binary evaluations of involuntariness to examine how system design mediates individual adjustment [1]. The central research gap lies in understanding how digital workplace surveillance interacts with the psychological processes triggered by imposed organizational change.

13. Pandemic-Driven System Disruption and Surveillance Expansion

Organizational environments are shaped by external forces that are often discontinuous and unpredictable [21]. Pandemics exemplify such disruptions, compelling rapid restructuring of work processes at scale. Kniffin et al. [3] argue that examining historical responses to epidemics provides insight into the enduring consequences of large-scale crises. Across history, pandemics have catalyzed structural reforms in labor regulation, health policy, and workplace design [22].

The COVID-19 pandemic similarly precipitated widespread transformation, accelerating remote work adoption and legitimizing digital oversight mechanisms as tools for continuity and risk mitigation. Unlike incremental technological change, this shift occurred under conditions of urgency, leaving limited opportunity for ergonomic evaluation of psychosocial impacts. As organizations sought to maintain productivity outside traditional offices, digital monitoring systems were often deployed to re-establish managerial visibility. These systems, ranging from time-tracking platforms to algorithmic productivity analytics, became embedded within the operational fabric of remote work.

Historical precedents illustrate how crises can expose structural vulnerabilities. The 1918 influenza pandemic, for example, revealed hazardous working conditions and prompted reforms in occupational health and safety after significant labor disruption [23]. Similarly, contemporary surveillance expansion may reveal tensions between performance optimization and employee well-being. For instance, continuous monitoring intended to ensure productivity may inadvertently erode psychological safety, thereby undermining long-term system resilience.

From a socio-technical ergonomics standpoint, pandemics act as catalysts for rapid system redesign. However, sustainable redesign requires more than technological substitution; it also demands alignment among tools, governance structures, and human needs. Laws and policies enacted in response to past outbreaks were to protect worker health and dignity [24–26]. Analogously, contemporary organizations must evaluate whether digital workplace surveillance enhances safety and coordination without compromising morale or trust.

Practical implications emerge from this analysis. Consider two contrasting implementations of monitoring software during a pandemic-induced remote transition. In one scenario, software is deployed unilaterally with minimal explanation, and performance metrics are tied directly to disciplinary action. In another, monitoring data are shared transparently, used primarily to identify workload bottlenecks, and accompanied by forums for employee feedback. Both systems may achieve oversight objectives, yet their socio-technical consequences differ markedly. The former risks fostering distrust and resistance; the latter may reinforce shared accountability and adaptive learning.

14. Choice Theory and Perceived Autonomy in Digitally Mediated Work Systems

Choice Theory, advanced by Glasser [27], asserts that individuals exercise agency over their actions and emotional responses, emphasizing internal control over external determinants. Within a socio-technical ergonomics framework, this emphasis on perceived agency becomes critical when evaluating digitally monitored work environments. If employees interpret surveillance technologies as externally imposed constraints that dictate behavior, the psychological architecture of the work system shifts toward external control dynamics [27]. Such conditions may attenuate intrinsic motivation and diminish perceived autonomy, both central to sustainable performance.

Glasser's distinction between internal and external control psychology provides a useful analytic lens. External control psychology attributes emotional states and outcomes to forces outside the self, often fostering compliance rather than commitment [27]. In contrast, internal control psychology situates responsibility within the individual, strengthening internal locus of control and personal accountability [28]. From an ergonomic standpoint, work systems designed around heavy digital surveillance risk reinforcing external control orientations if employees perceive monitoring as coercive rather than supportive. For example, remote employees whose keystrokes and screen activity are continuously tracked may shift from proactive task engagement to defensive behavior management; working to satisfy metrics rather than to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Optimizing socio-technical systems therefore requires calibrating monitoring practices in ways that preserve psychological ownership of work. Transparent policies, participatory governance, and feedback loops that frame analytics as developmental rather than punitive can help to sustain internal control perceptions. In this way, technology functions as an enabling scaffold rather than an instrument of constraint, aligning system performance with human autonomy.

15. Personal Engagement Theory in Remote and Hybrid Contexts

Kahn's [29] personal engagement theory posits that employees bring varying degrees of emotional, cognitive, and physical presence to their roles, depending on the psychological conditions embedded within the work environment. Engagement, in this sense, reflects the depth of self-expression individuals are willing to invest in their tasks. Organizational leaders frequently associate high engagement with improved performance outcomes [30], yet engagement is not merely a cultural aspiration; it is also a function of system design.

From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, engagement emerges when structural conditions support psychological safety, meaningfulness, and availability. Kahn's [29] grounded theory, informed by Goffman's [31] work on attachment and detachment behaviors, suggests that employees dynamically regulate their involvement based on contextual cues. In remote environments augmented by digital monitoring, these cues are technologically mediated. For example, if collaborative platforms log response times and visibility indicators ("active now" statuses), employees may feel compelled to remain perpetually present, even when cognitively fatigued. While such visibility may enhance coordination, it can simultaneously constrain authentic engagement by encouraging surface-level participation rather than deep cognitive investment.

Gallup [32] describes engaged employees as present, committed, and enthusiastic about their work and colleagues. However, in contexts of involuntary remote work, engagement may fluctuate as employees negotiate altered social connections and surveillance expectations. Studying engagement under these conditions offers insight into how technological infrastructures influence not only task completion, but also identity enactment and relational cohesion. A socio-technical approach would advocate for system configura-

tions that enable meaningful collaboration without equating engagement with constant digital activity.

16. Well-Being as a System-Level Outcome

Well-being is a multidimensional construct, interpreted variably across philosophical, psychological, and lay perspectives [33,34]. Within organizational research, distinctions are commonly drawn between psychological well-being (PWB) and subjective well-being (SWB). PWB emphasizes purposeful engagement with life's existential challenges [35], whereas SWB centers on individuals' evaluations of happiness and life satisfaction [36,37]. From a socio-technical ergonomics standpoint, both dimensions are emergent properties of system design rather than purely individual states.

Psychological well-being is strengthened when work systems provide opportunities for competence development, autonomy, and meaningful contribution. For instance, remote employees entrusted with outcome-based evaluation rather than constant activity monitoring may experience greater alignment between effort and purpose, reinforcing PWB. Subjective well-being, by contrast, may fluctuate more directly with perceived fairness and emotional climate. Empirical research linking emotional health with work performance [38,39] underscores that well-being is not peripheral to productivity but foundational to it. Hamar et al. [40] argue that healthier employees demonstrate improved quality of life and enhanced performance, illustrating the reciprocal relationship between well-being and organizational effectiveness. In digitally monitored contexts, sustained exposure to intrusive oversight may undermine both PWB and SWB by constraining autonomy and heightening stress. Ergonomic system optimization therefore requires balancing security and accountability demands with the psychological needs that sustain well-being.

17. Change Processes and Adaptive Capacity in Involuntary Remote Work

Organizational change frameworks provide additional insight into how employees experience abrupt system redesigns. The change cycle articulated by Salerno and Brock [41] outlines stages including loss, doubt, discomfort, discovery, understanding, and integration. Each stage reflects psychological and behavioral adjustments that leaders can anticipate and manage. Similarly, the Kubler-Ross [42] change curve, originally developed to describe grief responses, maps emotional trajectories such as shock, denial, frustration, depression, experimentation, decision, and integration. Though initially conceptualized in clinical contexts, these stages have been applied to organizational transitions [43].

From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, these models highlight that system change is experienced not only structurally, but also emotionally. Involuntary remote work represents a profound alteration in spatial boundaries, communication norms, and supervisory visibility. For example, employees accustomed to collaborative office settings may initially experience loss or shock when relocated to isolated home environments, followed by frustration when confronted with unfamiliar digital monitoring systems. Over time, adaptive responses such as experimentation and integration may emerge, provided organizational supports are present.

While both the change cycle [41] and Kubler-Ross [42] frameworks illuminate psychological responses, their application to involuntary remote work remains underdeveloped in the literature. Particularly absent is analysis of how digital surveillance interacts with these emotional trajectories. If monitoring is introduced during early stages of disruption, it may amplify doubt and discomfort; if introduced with participatory dialogue and developmental framing, it may facilitate discovery and integration.

18. Involuntary Remote Work, Digital Surveillance, and Personal Engagement

Employee engagement has long been positioned as a predictor of organizational effectiveness, with evidence suggesting that individuals who invest themselves cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally in their roles demonstrate superior performance outcomes [13,44,45]. However, the rapid expansion of digital workplace surveillance during involuntary remote work introduces structural conditions that may fundamentally alter how engagement is experienced and expressed. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, engagement cannot be treated as a static trait; it is an emergent property of the interaction between technological systems, organizational policies, and human psychological processes.

Kahn's [29] conceptualization of personal engagement provides a foundational lens for understanding this dynamic. He argued that individuals vary in the extent to which they bring their "preferred selves" into role performance, expressing presence across physical, cognitive, and emotional domains. In digitally monitored environments, this presence is mediated through platforms that log activity, measure responsiveness, and quantify visible output. For example, a remote analyst whose productivity dashboard tracks time spent in specific applications may adjust behavior to maintain an appearance of continuous engagement. While such visibility may satisfy managerial oversight requirements, it risks conflating genuine engagement with measurable activity.

Kahn [29,46] identified three psychological conditions underpinning engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Meaningfulness emerges when individuals perceive their contributions as valuable and aligned with personal growth [47,48]. In surveillance-intensive contexts, however, meaningfulness may be compromised if work becomes framed primarily through compliance metrics rather than substantive impact. A software engineer evaluated predominantly on keystroke frequency, for instance, may experience diminished role significance compared to evaluation based on problem-solving outcomes.

Psychological safety, rooted in the ability to express oneself without fear of adverse consequences [29,49], is similarly influenced by digital monitoring. Continuous oversight may inadvertently signal mistrust, reducing employees' willingness to engage in creative risk-taking or candid dialogue. Availability, defined as possessing sufficient emotional and cognitive resources to perform effectively [50], may also be strained when surveillance systems extend expectations of constant accessibility. Collectively, these dynamics suggest that involuntary remote work under surveillance conditions may reshape engagement in ways not captured by prior voluntary telework research.

19. Involuntary Remote Work and Choice Theory in Monitored Environments

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled organizations to make rapid decisions within highly uncertain environments [51]. Remote work, once largely elective, became mandated for many employees. Choice theory [27] offers a valuable framework for analyzing behavioral responses within this context. Glasser posited that individuals are guided by internal motivations rather than external determinants, emphasizing personal responsibility and perceived agency.

Prior to the pandemic, voluntary remote work arrangements aligned with internal control principles, enabling employees to select flexible configurations that satisfied personal and professional needs [52,53]. In such contexts, autonomy reinforced internal locus of control [28]. In contrast, involuntary remote work coupled with digital monitoring

may foster perceptions of external control, particularly when surveillance practices are implemented without participatory input.

Choice theory identifies five basic needs: love and belonging, power, fun, freedom, and survival [27] that influence behavior. Digital workplace surveillance intersects directly with these needs. For example, persistent camera activation during virtual meetings may undermine freedom and authenticity; algorithmic productivity rankings may affect perceptions of power and competence; limited informal interaction may erode belonging. Conversely, well-designed monitoring systems that prioritize developmental feedback over punitive metrics can support survival (job security) and belonging by clarifying expectations.

The concept of the “quality world” further underscores how individual perceptions shape responses to surveillance [54]. Employees interpret monitoring practices through unique experiential filters. A worker with prior exposure to supportive performance analytics may view tracking tools as constructive, whereas another may perceive identical tools as intrusive. Total behavior, encompassing acting, thinking, feeling, and physiological responses, emerges from these interpretations [55]. Thus, socio-technical optimization requires attention not only to technological functionality, but also to the perceptual frameworks through which employees experience monitoring.

20. Digital Surveillance and Employee Well-Being

Employee well-being is increasingly recognized as integral to organizational sustainability [56]. In digitally monitored remote environments, well-being must be evaluated at both subjective and psychological levels. Subjective well-being (SWB), grounded in hedonic traditions, reflects individuals’ cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives [36,57]. Psychological well-being (PWB), aligned with eudaimonic perspectives, emphasizes meaning, autonomy, and personal growth [58,59].

Empirical research indicates that control over work arrangements significantly influences well-being outcomes [60,61]. When employees voluntarily select remote work schedules, positive associations with work–life balance often emerge. However, involuntary scheduling instability has been linked to psychological distress [62]. In surveillance-heavy remote systems, similar stressors may arise if employees perceive diminished control over pace, timing, or privacy.

For example, employees whose login duration is automatically flagged for deviation may experience elevated negative affect [36], particularly if contextual factors, such as caregiving responsibilities, are not considered. Conversely, organizations that use analytics to identify workload imbalances and proactively to redistribute tasks may enhance environmental mastery and purpose in life, central components of PWB [58]. These contrasting scenarios illustrate that digital monitoring’s impact on well-being depends on its integration within supportive versus punitive organizational cultures.

Although post-pandemic scholarship on remote work has expanded [53], limited research explicitly addresses the intersection of involuntariness and surveillance intensity. A socio-technical perspective suggests that well-being outcomes are contingent upon system-level design choices rather than remote work itself.

21. Remote Work as a Digitally Mediated System

Remote work involves performing professional tasks outside traditional office spaces through digital communication technologies [63,64]. Historically, voluntary remote work has been associated with increased job satisfaction, cost savings, and perceived work–life balance [7,53]. However, challenges including boundary management and social isolation have also been documented [65].

During the pandemic, remote work was implemented rapidly, often without sufficient ergonomic planning [3,13]. Subsequent research reveals mixed outcomes. Some studies report reductions in psychological stress under certain conditions [66], while others highlight challenges related to work–life integration, particularly among parents and caregivers [67,68]. These findings underscore that remote work outcomes are mediated by contextual variables.

The addition of digital workplace surveillance further complicates this landscape. Pre-pandemic resistance to remote work often stemmed from managerial distrust [7]. Surveillance technologies may mitigate such distrust by increasing visibility, yet they may simultaneously introduce new psychosocial risks. For single employees without dependents, a population less frequently examined, the experience of isolation may differ from that of caregivers, yet perceptions of surveillance may still influence engagement and well-being.

From a socio-technical ergonomics standpoint, remote work is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently detrimental. Its effectiveness depends on the alignment between technological tools, organizational policies, and human psychological needs. Digital workplace monitoring, when integrated thoughtfully, can enhance coordination and security. When misaligned, it may undermine trust, engagement, and well-being. Future research must therefore move beyond binary assessments of remote work to examine how surveillance intensity, voluntariness, and organizational culture interact to shape resilient work systems.

22. The Ambivalence of Digital Monitoring Technologies

Contemporary scholarship cautions against treating digital workplace surveillance as a neutral or inherently progressive solution to organizational challenges. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] argue that technology-driven innovation is not impartial by design; rather, its consequences are shaped by political, managerial, and institutional choices. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, this insight is foundational. Monitoring systems do not operate independently of human intention. Their design parameters, data interpretation frameworks, and governance structures determine whether they enhance system coordination or reproduce asymmetrical control.

During the pandemic, many organizations adopted monitoring tools under emergency conditions, often without systematic evaluation of long-term implications. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] warn against normalizing these emergency measures without critical scrutiny. In socio-technical terms, crisis-driven implementation risks embedding reactive control mechanisms into routine practice. For example, a firm that introduced continuous activity tracking to ensure remote accountability during lockdowns may continue using the system post-crisis, even when alternative trust-based models could be more effective. The ergonomic concern is not merely privacy intrusion, but also systemic misalignment, in which technological capability outpaces deliberate design, undermining well-being and trust.

Effective rule making, therefore, requires acknowledging that surveillance technologies are ambivalent instruments. When aligned with transparent governance and participatory decision making, analytics can support workload distribution, cybersecurity risk mitigation, and process optimization. When implemented unilaterally and opaquely, they may erode psychological safety and weaken collaborative capacity. The distinction lies in managerial philosophy and institutional safeguards, not in the technology itself.

23. Cyberslacking, Managerial Anxiety, and Productivity Assumptions

The discourse surrounding “cyberslacking,” employees engaging in non-work-related online activities, has intensified alongside remote work expansion [18]. Concerns about diminished oversight in home environments have prompted some managers to equate

digital visibility with productivity. In response, organizations have deployed software capable of tracking website visits, logging keystrokes, and monitoring application usage. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] observe that this surge in monitoring has often stemmed from managerial anxiety rooted in the assumption that employees lack intrinsic motivation.

From a socio-technical standpoint, this assumption warrants scrutiny. Productivity in knowledge-intensive roles is rarely linear or continuously observable. Creative problem solving, strategic planning, and complex analysis frequently involve cognitive incubation periods that may not generate visible digital activity. For instance, a policy analyst reflecting on regulatory implications may appear “inactive” within monitoring dashboards despite engaging in high-value cognitive work. Metrics focused solely on online activity risk conflating motion with contribution.

Empirical evidence linking keystroke frequency or website duration to meaningful performance outcomes remains limited [18]. Yet, the rapid proliferation of monitoring software suggests that perception, rather than evidence, drove adoption. An ergonomically informed design would instead evaluate whether specific monitoring indicators genuinely correlate with task quality and organizational objectives. If not, reliance on such metrics may distort behavior, incentivizing superficial engagement while discouraging deep, reflective work.

24. Designing Monitoring Systems for Sustainable Performance

The expansion of surveillance technologies during the pandemic represents a pivotal moment in organizational design. Aloisi and de Stefano [18] caution against seeking reassurance in digital solutions without examining their broader implications. A socio-technical ergonomics approach reframes the central question: not whether monitoring reduces cyberslacking, but whether it enhances overall system resilience, safety, and performance.

Consider two contrasting implementations of monitoring tools in a remote customer service department. In one scenario, managers track every second of idle time and penalize minor deviations. Employees, anticipating scrutiny, minimize breaks and avoid collaborative discussion, leading to cognitive fatigue and diminished morale. In another scenario, aggregated analytics identify peak workload periods, enabling managers to adjust staffing and prevent burnout. Here, technology supports adaptive coordination rather than disciplinary enforcement. The divergent outcomes illustrate how identical tools can produce markedly different system effects depending on governance philosophy.

Ultimately, digital workplace surveillance must be evaluated within a broader organizational ecosystem encompassing leadership style, cultural norms, and regulatory oversight. Uncritical normalization of emergency-era monitoring practices risks institutionalizing control-oriented paradigms that may compromise trust and innovation. Conversely, deliberate integration of surveillance tools within transparent, ethically grounded frameworks can enhance coordination while safeguarding autonomy. Recent research underscores that digital monitoring technologies are neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently oppressive [18]. Their impact depends on how organizations design, regulate, and contextualize their use. A socio-technical ergonomics lens provides the analytical architecture necessary to ensure that monitoring practices serve collective performance and well-being rather than managerial anxiety alone.

25. Theory X, Digital Surveillance, and Control-Oriented Management

McGregor’s [69] Theory X, which is a seminal research concept, articulates a managerial philosophy grounded in assumptions that employees are inherently disinclined toward work and must therefore be directed, monitored, and, if necessary, coerced to achieve organizational objectives. While originally conceptualized within mid-twentieth-

century industrial contexts, these assumptions resonate strongly with contemporary digital workplace surveillance practices. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, Theory X aligns with system designs that prioritize oversight, compliance, and control over autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Theory X presumes that individuals avoid responsibility, lack ambition, and prioritize security [69]. When translated into digitally mediated work environments, these assumptions often manifest as pervasive monitoring infrastructures: time-tracking dashboards, automated productivity scoring, keystroke logging, and algorithmic performance analytics. Such tools operationalize the belief that adequate effort must be externally verified. For example, an organization that mandates continuous screen capture software to confirm employee presence reflects a Theory X orientation: productivity is ensured through surveillance rather than through commitment.

McGregor [69] cautioned that management philosophies rooted in direction and control are insufficient motivators, particularly when employees' primary needs are social and egoistic rather than purely economic. In surveillance-intensive environments, employees may comply behaviorally while disengaging psychologically. Observable consequences may include minimalistic task execution, resistance to innovation, or performative busyness; behaviors consistent with what McGregor described as passivity or reluctance to assume responsibility. In socio-technical terms, such systems optimize visibility but risk undermining adaptability and long-term resilience. When digital monitoring is used primarily as an enforcement mechanism, organizations may inadvertently construct what McGregor termed "a web of their own weaving" [69], reinforcing distrust and reducing discretionary effort.

From an ergonomic standpoint, the critical issue is not the presence of monitoring technology per se, but the managerial assumptions embedded within its design and deployment. Surveillance systems informed by Theory X are likely to emphasize error detection, exception reporting, and corrective discipline. While such approaches may stabilize short-term outputs, they may also elevate cognitive strain and erode relational trust, key determinants of sustainable performance [70].

26. Theory Y and the Design of Trust-Centered Monitoring Systems

In contrast, McGregor's Theory Y proposes that work can be as natural as play when conditions support meaningful engagement [69]. Theory Y assumes that individuals are capable of self-direction, creativity, and responsibility when organizational goals are aligned with personal aspirations. Within a socio-technical ergonomics framework, Theory Y offers a foundation for designing monitoring systems that enhance, rather than constrain, human potential.

Theory Y rejects the notion that external control and punitive oversight are the primary drivers of effort. Instead, it emphasizes internal commitment to objectives, reinforced by intrinsic rewards such as growth, recognition, and self-actualization [69]. Applied to digital workplace surveillance, this perspective suggests that analytics can be structured as developmental feedback mechanisms rather than disciplinary tools. For instance, a cybersecurity team might use system logs not to penalize minor deviations, but to identify workflow bottlenecks, redistribute workload equitably, and support professional development. In such cases, monitoring data serve collective improvement rather than hierarchical enforcement.

McGregor's [69] seminal research characterizes Theory Y employees as viewing work as a natural extension of purposeful activity. This orientation aligns with monitoring models that grant employees visibility into their own performance metrics, fostering shared accountability. Rather than concealing algorithmic criteria, organizations adopting a Theory Y approach would explain how productivity indicators are calculated and invite employee

input into refinement. Such transparency mitigates perceptions of unilateral control and supports psychological safety.

McGregor acknowledged that implementing Theory Y would challenge deeply ingrained managerial habits [70]. In digitally monitored environments, this challenge is amplified by technological capabilities that make total visibility technically feasible. The ergonomic task, therefore, is to exercise restraint and intentionality in system design. The question is not whether organizations can monitor continuously, but whether such monitoring optimizes human–system integration.

27. Integration, Conflict Resolution, and Surveillance Governance

The concept of integration offers further insight into managing tensions surrounding digital surveillance. The research has described three approaches to resolving differences: domination, compromise, and integration [70]. Domination reflects unilateral decision making; compromise yields partial concessions; integration generates novel solutions that transcend zero-sum outcomes. In the context of workplace monitoring, domination might involve imposing surveillance tools without consultation [70]. Compromise could entail limited transparency without altering core practices. Integration, however, would involve collaborative development of monitoring policies that balance security requirements with employee dignity.

Consider a technology firm implementing endpoint monitoring to protect intellectual property. A domination approach might mandate tracking software across all devices without explanation. An integrative approach would convene employee representatives to clarify data collection scope, retention policies, and safeguards against misuse. By involving employees in governance design, the organization transforms surveillance from an imposed constraint into a collectively negotiated system feature. Such participatory structures strengthen trust and reinforce shared commitment to organizational objectives [70,71].

From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, effective surveillance governance requires harmonizing technological capability with cultural values and leadership philosophy. In digitally mediated workplaces, the managerial assumptions underlying monitoring practices ultimately determine whether surveillance becomes a source of systemic strain or a catalyst for coordinated, high-performing work.

28. Methods and Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to examine how Generation Y and Generation Z employees experienced digital workplace surveillance within telework environments. This approach was selected because the study sought to understand the meaning employees assigned to monitoring practices, not merely to measure attitudes toward surveillance or test statistical relationships among variables. The central concern was interpretive: how employees made sense of being monitored, how surveillance affected their perceptions of trust and autonomy, and how those perceptions shaped morale, job satisfaction, psychological security, and organizational commitment. A quantitative design could have measured the strength of relationships among these constructs across a larger sample, but it would not have captured the emotional nuance, contextual detail, and lived complexity of digitally monitored telework. Phenomenology was therefore the stronger methodological choice because it allowed the study to examine surveillance as an experienced condition of work rather than as a detached technical variable.

The phenomenological design was also appropriate because digital monitoring operated at the intersection of technology, organizational policy, supervision, and employee identity. From a socio-technical ergonomics perspective, surveillance technologies were not neutral instruments; they were embedded features of the work system that shaped how

employees understood accountability, respect, managerial trust, and professional value [1]. The study therefore required a method capable of capturing how participants interpreted the same general phenomenon in relation to their own work roles, organizational cultures, and generational expectations. This design provided value by revealing not only what participants thought about surveillance, but how surveillance was lived, felt, rationalized, resisted, or normalized within everyday remote work routines.

A qualitative phenomenological approach was more effective than methods designed for consensus development or rank agreement because the study did not seek expert agreement about best practices, policy priorities, or future scenarios. Delphi methods are often used to generate structured consensus among experts through multiple rounds of feedback, while Kendall-type procedures are commonly associated with assessing levels of agreement or concordance among rankings. Those approaches would have been misaligned with the purpose of this study because the research question did not ask participants to rank surveillance practices or reach collective agreement. Instead, the study asked participants to describe and interpret their personal experiences. Using a Delphi or Kendall-oriented approach could have flattened the individuality, contradiction, and emotional complexity that phenomenology was designed to preserve. The value of the selected approach was that it prioritized depth, meaning, and experiential richness rather than consensus, prediction, or statistical agreement.

29. Participants and Sampling

The study included ten participants: five Generation Y employees and five Generation Z employees who had worked in telework environments involving digital workplace monitoring. This sampling strategy was appropriate because all participants had direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The study did not attempt to represent all remote workers statistically; rather, it focused on a defined group of employees whose experiences could illuminate how younger workforce cohorts interpreted digital surveillance within contemporary telework systems. This alignment between participant characteristics and the research purpose strengthened the methodological coherence of the study.

The sample size was justified by the principles of phenomenological inquiry, in which analytical depth and thematic richness are prioritized over numerical breadth [72–74]. In qualitative phenomenology, a smaller sample can be methodologically sound when participants share relevant experiential characteristics and when the research question is focused. The study examined a specific phenomenon: digitally monitored telework among Generation Y and Generation Z employees. Because the participant group was intentionally bounded by generation, work arrangement, and exposure to monitoring technologies, the sample was sufficiently focused to support intensive analysis of shared meaning structures.

Data saturation was reached by the sixth interview. In this study, saturation referred to the point at which additional participant accounts no longer produced substantially new themes, categories, or interpretive insights [72–74]. By the sixth interview, the core patterns had become analytically stable, including perceived distrust, reduced autonomy, diminished morale, uncertainty about data use, concerns about respect, and conditional organizational commitment. Interviews seven through ten did not substantially alter the emerging thematic structure; instead, they confirmed, refined, and deepened the themes already identified. This process justified the final sample of ten participants because the additional interviews functioned as confirmatory evidence rather than as sources of fundamentally new categories. The completed sample therefore supported both saturation and credibility by demonstrating that the major findings were not isolated impressions

from a small number of participants but recurring experiential patterns across the participant group.

The inclusion of both Generation Y and Generation Z employees also strengthened the study's relevance. These cohorts were particularly important because they were likely to shape the future of digitally mediated work through their expectations of flexibility, transparency, fairness, autonomy, and ethical technology use. Their experiences provided insight into how younger employees interpreted surveillance not only as a workplace procedure, but also as a signal of organizational values. This sampling approach gave the study practical value by connecting individual experience to broader questions about retention, engagement, trust, and the sustainability of remote and hybrid work systems.

30. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in two structured phases that were designed to promote reflection, depth, and methodological rigor. The two-phase structure was effective because it allowed participants to first think carefully about their experiences in writing and then expand those reflections through interactive dialogue. This sequencing improved the quality of the data by reducing reliance on immediate recall during the interview alone. It also allowed the researcher to enter each interview with a preliminary understanding of the participant's perspective, which made the follow-up questions more focused and analytically useful.

31. Phase 1: Pre-Interview Reflection via Email

In Phase 1, participants received six open-ended questions by email before their interviews. These questions asked them to reflect on how digital workplace monitoring had influenced trust, job satisfaction, morale, perceived role security, feelings of being valued and respected, and organizational commitment. The objective of this phase was to give participants time to consider their experiences deliberately rather than respond only in the moment. This was important because surveillance-related experiences often involved subtle emotional and relational effects, such as anxiety, self-monitoring, resentment, uncertainty, or diminished respect. Written reflection allowed participants to identify examples, clarify their own interpretations, and articulate experiences that may not have surfaced as quickly in a live interview.

The pre-interview email phase also strengthened the study's credibility. Written responses provided an initial data source that could be compared with interview narratives. This helped the researcher identify areas requiring elaboration, clarification, or probing. For example, if a participant wrote that monitoring reduced trust, the interview could explore whether that loss of trust resulted from lack of transparency, fear of data misuse, perceived managerial suspicion, or prior organizational experiences. In this way, the email phase served both a reflective and analytic function. It prepared participants for deeper discussion while helping the researcher develop more precise follow-up questions.

32. Phase 2: Follow-Up Zoom Interviews

In Phase 2, each participant completed a 60 to 75 min semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom. The objective of this phase was to expand the written reflections into richer phenomenological accounts. The interviews allowed participants to explain context, describe emotional reactions, provide practical examples, and clarify how surveillance affected their day-to-day telework experience. Semi-structured interviewing was appropriate because it provided enough consistency across participants to support thematic comparison while preserving flexibility to pursue important details unique to each participant's experience.

The Zoom interviews added value because they captured the interpretive complexity that written responses alone could not fully provide. Participants could explain contradictions, such as understanding the organization's need for cybersecurity while still feeling mistrusted by productivity tracking. They could also describe concrete examples, such as changing work habits to appear active, avoiding breaks, feeling uneasy about idle-time alerts, or questioning whether leadership valued outcomes or merely visible activity. Interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. This process supported accuracy, transparency, and systematic coding. Together, the email reflections and interviews created a richer data set than either method would have produced independently.

33. Data Analysis and Coding

Written responses and interview transcripts were analyzed through an iterative phenomenological coding process. The analysis began with open coding to identify significant statements related to trust, job satisfaction, morale, perceived security, feeling valued, feeling respected, autonomy, engagement, and organizational commitment. These statements were then reviewed across cases to identify patterns, tensions, and recurring meanings. The emphasis remained on the structural essence of the experience rather than on simple frequency counts. This was appropriate because the study's objective was to understand how surveillance was experienced, not to quantify how many participants held a particular opinion.

After initial coding, related codes were clustered into broader thematic categories that reflected shared experiential patterns. These categories captured how participants interpreted digital monitoring as a relational signal, how they adjusted behavior in response to surveillance, and how monitoring influenced their sense of psychological safety and professional respect. The analysis also examined points of convergence and divergence between Generation Y and Generation Z participants. This comparative attention added depth without turning the study into a statistical generational comparison. The goal was to understand whether the two cohorts shared common meaning structures while also noting differences in emphasis, language, or expectation.

A consensus-based review process was used to strengthen analytic rigor and coherence. Emerging themes were reviewed systematically to ensure that they were grounded in participant accounts and not merely imposed by the researcher. The continued analysis after the sixth interview was especially important because saturation had already been reached by that point. Interviews seven through ten served as a check on the stability of the thematic structure. Rather than generating new categories, they reinforced and elaborated the existing findings. This strengthened confidence that the themes reflected the shared experience of digitally monitored telework among the participants.

The data analysis approach was effective because it preserved the complexity of participants' lived experiences while still producing organized, defensible findings. It allowed the study to move from individual statements to broader insights about digital surveillance as a socio-technical work-system issue. The resulting themes connected directly to the study's research problem by showing how monitoring practices shaped trust, morale, job satisfaction, autonomy, psychological security, respect, and organizational commitment. This analytic process also supported the study's practical value by identifying not only that surveillance affected employees, but how and why those effects occurred in everyday telework environments.

34. Methodological Rationale and Value of the Approach

The selected design was effective because it aligned the research problem, participant group, data collection procedures, and analysis strategy around lived experience. The study investigated a phenomenon that was subjective, relational, and context dependent. Employees did not experience surveillance only as software; they experienced it as a signal of trust, a form of managerial judgment, a source of anxiety, or a constraint on professional autonomy. Phenomenology was therefore valuable because it allowed those meanings to emerge from participant narratives rather than forcing them into predetermined categories.

The two-phase data collection approach offered several advantages. First, it promoted more thoughtful participation by giving individuals time to reflect before speaking. Second, it produced richer interviews because the researcher could probe written responses with greater precision. Third, it enhanced credibility by allowing comparison between participants' written and spoken accounts. Fourth, it supported saturation by generating detailed data from each participant rather than relying on brief or superficial responses. These advantages made the approach especially suitable for studying a sensitive topic such as workplace surveillance, where participants may need time to articulate experiences involving discomfort, mistrust, or perceived vulnerability.

The study's reliance on saturation by the sixth interview, followed by four additional confirmatory interviews, provided a defensible basis for the sample size. Saturation demonstrated that the core findings were recurring and analytically stable, while the remaining interviews strengthened confidence in the adequacy of the data. This approach reflected accepted qualitative research logic: the value of the sample was judged by the richness, relevance, and redundancy of the data rather than by statistical representativeness. As a result, the final sample of ten participants was appropriate for a focused phenomenological study of digitally monitored telework among Generation Y and Generation Z employees.

The decision not to use Delphi, Kendall, or related consensus-oriented methods further strengthened the methodological fit. Those approaches would have been useful if the study had sought expert agreement on surveillance policy, ranked priorities for telework governance, or consensus regarding best practices. However, they would not have been appropriate for uncovering the lived experience of employees subject to monitoring. The study's aim was not to produce consensus, but to understand meaning. For that reason, phenomenology provided a more coherent and compelling approach because it preserved individual experience while still identifying shared themes across participants.

Overall, the methodology provided a rigorous and appropriate foundation for the study's results. It generated detailed evidence about how younger employees experienced digital surveillance within telework environments and how those experiences shaped key psychological and organizational outcomes. The approach was valuable because it connected participant narratives to larger questions of socio-technical design, workplace trust, employee well-being, and the future of remote work.

35. Data Collection Questions

Participants were asked the following six focused questions:

1. How has digital workplace monitoring influenced your level of trust in your organization or direct supervisor?
2. In what ways, if any, has monitoring affected your overall job satisfaction while working remotely?
3. How has digital surveillance impacted your workplace morale or motivation?
4. Does the presence of monitoring technologies make you feel more secure or less secure in your role? Please explain.

5. How has digital monitoring influenced whether you feel valued and respected as an employee?
6. How have these experiences with monitoring affected your sense of organizational commitment or your desire to remain with your employer?

36. Methodological Alignment

This qualitative, two-phase design directly supports the study's objective of explaining how digital surveillance is experienced and how it shapes psychological and relational outcomes within telework systems. By focusing on trust, job satisfaction, morale, security, respect, and organizational commitment, the study examines factors central to sustainable system performance from a socio-technical ergonomics perspective. The findings are intended to inform organizational design decisions that balance technological oversight with the human conditions necessary for resilient and high-performing work environments.

Question 1

How has digital workplace monitoring influenced your level of trust in your organization or direct supervisor?

Common Theme 1: Trust Undermined by Presumed Distrust (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Participants experienced monitoring as an implicit signal that leadership questioned their professionalism, competence, or integrity.

Participant Quote—"Maya" (Gen Z):

"When the monitoring software was introduced, no one explained why it was necessary. I remember sitting at my desk feeling this low-level anxiety humming in the background. I kept thinking, 'If I'm valued here, if I've consistently delivered results, why do you need to track my keystrokes?' It wasn't just about privacy. It was about what the monitoring implied. It suggested that my expertise wasn't enough, that my track record didn't speak for itself. Instead of feeling trusted as a professional, I felt like a student being watched during an exam. That subtle shift changed how I saw leadership. Trust doesn't erode overnight, but it thins when you realize you're being monitored without a clear reason."

Participant Quote—"Daniel" (Gen Y):

"I've spent over a decade building my reputation in this field. I manage complex projects, mentor junior staff, and consistently meet deadlines. So, when activity tracking became the norm, it felt almost insulting. It introduced this persistent distraction. I found myself moving my mouse just to avoid looking 'inactive' That's not how experts work. We think deeply, we pause, we reflect. Monitoring reduced my work to surface-level movement. It made me question whether leadership truly understood or respected the nature of our work. Trust isn't just about believing I won't steal noted minutes; it's about believing in my competence. And the monitoring chipped away at that."

Participant Quote—"Alyssa" (Gen Z):

"The hardest part wasn't being monitored; it was not knowing what story the data was telling about me. I'd wonder, 'Is someone interpreting this dip in activity as laziness?' That uncertainty created anxiety I didn't have before. If I'm hired as an expert, I should be evaluated on outcomes, not on how often my keyboard clicks. When there's no clarity about why monitoring is necessary, it feels like a contradiction; you say I'm trusted and respected, but your systems suggest otherwise. I felt like my boss was like my ex-boyfriend, who stalked me on-line. I just wanted [to] focus and be left alone but felt distracted about if I was currently

being watch[ed]. With each task I completed, I was distracted by thoughts about if my boss watching like the song about Stata Claus, which says, he's making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice."

Question 2

In what ways, if any, has monitoring affected your overall job satisfaction while working remotely?

Common Theme: Shift from Results to Visibility (6 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Participants reported a shift from outcome-driven satisfaction to metric-driven compliance.

Participant Quote—"Sofia" (Gen Z):

"I used to feel fulfilled when I completed a challenging assignment or solved a complicated issue. That's what job satisfaction meant to me; knowing I created value. But once monitoring dashboards became central, I noticed my focus shifting. Instead of asking, 'Is this high quality?' I'd think, 'Am I showing enough activity?' It created this constant background pressure. I wasn't enjoying my work the same way because part of my attention was always diverted to how I appeared digitally. Satisfaction became conditional on staying visible rather than being effective."

Participant Quote—"Anthony" (Gen Y):

"My job satisfaction decreased in a subtle but real way. It wasn't dramatic; it was cumulative. Every time I paused to think deeply about a problem, I felt a flicker of worry. Will this look like I'm idle?' That mental interruption disrupted my flow. It's difficult to enjoy meaningful work when you're preoccupied with how it's being tracked."

Participant Quote—"Rachel" (Gen Z):

"I've always believed work should be evaluated by results. If I meet my deadlines and produce strong outcomes, that should be enough. Monitoring shifted the emphasis from trust in results to suspicion of process. That tension made my satisfaction feel fragile."

Common Theme: Shift from Meaningful Work to Metric Compliance (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Participants described a transition from intrinsic motivation to performing behaviors aligned with measurable indicators.

Participant Quote—"Sofia" (Gen Z):

"I used to love solving complex problems. But once the dashboard started tracking 'active time,' I caught myself worrying about staying 'green' on the system. My satisfaction shifted from finishing great work to making sure my mouse never went idle."

Participant Quote—"Anthony" (Gen Y):

"It changed what I focused on. Instead of thinking about strategy, I was thinking about visibility. That constant awareness of being measured reduced the joy I used to feel."

Participant Quote—"Rachel" (Gen Z):

"I still enjoy my job, but it feels transactional now. I'm aware that my satisfaction is conditional on metrics, not creativity. I did not feel like they were committed to

me or loyal to me. If they were, they would trust me. Because they monitoring me, my level of effort changed. Since they were micro managing my time, I didn't do the extra things that I would do before, like work during lunch or staying little late to complete a project early. I gave the organization way more than my required 40 hours before all this started."

Question 3

How has digital surveillance impacted your workplace morale or motivation?

Common Theme: Motivation Replaced by Compliance (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Intrinsic motivation diminished as surveillance fostered defensive behavior rather than engaged contribution.

Participant Quote—"Eric" (Gen Y):

"Before monitoring, I was internally motivated. I wanted to exceed expectations because I cared about the work. After monitoring, my motivation became defensive. I was motivated to avoid being flagged. That's a very different emotional state. One is energizing; the other is draining."

Participant Quote—"Naomi" (Gen Z):

"I noticed morale dip across my team. Conversations shifted from innovation to anxiety about metrics. Instead of brainstorming freely, people were more cautious. It's hard to feel inspired when you feel scrutinized."

Participant Quote—"Olivia" (Gen Y):

"Morale is about feeling trusted and respected. When monitoring becomes the default response to remote work, it signals doubt. That doubt spreads quietly through a team. This almost seems like their support for remote workers is not sincere. It makes the company's commitment to a flexible workplace seem like window dressing."

Common Theme: Erosion of Intrinsic Motivation (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Surveillance reduced emotional energy and replaced internal drive with compliance-based motivation.

Participant Quote—"Eric" (Gen Y):

"I used to feel proud of exceeding expectations. Now I just aim to avoid being flagged. That's a different kind of motivation; it's defensive. Work results should be what matters most."

Participant Quote—"Naomi" (Gen Z):

"Morale dropped for me when I realized we were being ranked silently. It made collaboration feel competitive instead of supportive. It created [a] culture [in which] we all felt pressured to work unpaid overtime to make sure we have over the clocked hours being monitored."

Participant Quote—"Olivia" (Gen Y):

"I didn't feel inspired. I felt observed. There's a difference. Observation doesn't energize; it drains. The culture felt deficit based where the emphasis seemed to be on what was wrong instead of what was being done right and exceptional in terms of performance. If you work somewhere and the only feedback or policies are negative. It is demoralizing. I had anxiety at the start of my work day and insomnia at night before work. What made it feel so bad was the fact that I

worked from home. This added a new layer of fatigue and frustration that I could not feel comfortable in my home which was supposed to be my sanctuary and place of comfort. I felt trapped in my own home. It was crazy. It was really uncomfortable."

Question 4

Does the presence of monitoring technologies make you feel more secure or less secure in your role?

Common Theme: Psychological Vulnerability (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Monitoring created emotional exposure rather than reassurance.

Participant Quote—"Kevin" (Gen Z):

"They said monitoring was about protecting the company, which I understand. But emotionally, it made me feel exposed. I was nervous. I was scared that this information would be used to fire me or lay me off. I needed this job to pay my bills. I was so stressed out about it. I kept wondering whether small fluctuations in activity would be misread. That uncertainty made me feel less secure, not more."

Participant Quote—"Hannah" (Gen Y):

"I believe employees who consistently fail to deliver should be monitored and is fair and that makes sense. But applying blanket surveillance to high performers creates insecurity where none existed. It sends the message that no one is exempt from suspicion."

Participant Quote—"Luis" (Gen Z):

"Security should come from clarity and fairness. Instead, I felt like my role could be questioned based on data stripped of context. I did not understand how I was being evaluated. There was very little clarity from management, so everything was based on rumors and speculation."

Common Theme: Psychological Insecurity Despite Technical Security (7 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: While monitoring was sometimes framed as enhancing data or job security, participants often experienced increased psychological vulnerability.

Participant Quote—"Kevin" (Gen Z):

"They said it was about cybersecurity, which makes sense. But emotionally, it made me feel like my job status was vulnerable. Every click felt like it could be misinterpreted."

Participant Quote—"Hannah" (Gen Y):

"I felt technically secure but psychologically anxious. It's strange to feel protected and scrutinized at the same time."

Participant Quote—"Luis" (Gen Z):

"Security shouldn't feel like surveillance. Instead of feeling supported, I felt like my job could be questioned at any moment."

Question 5

How has digital monitoring influenced whether you feel valued and respected as an employee?

Common Theme: Respect Questioned by Excessive Oversight (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Monitoring practices were interpreted as undermining professional respect.

Participant Quote—“Megan” (Gen Y):

“When you hire someone for their expertise and then track their every move, it creates cognitive dissonance. Either you trust my expertise or you don’t. Respect should look like evaluating me on results, not minutes.”

Participant Quote—“Isaiah” (Gen Z):

“I want to feel valued for my ideas and contributions. Monitoring reduces that to data points. I am a person, not a dashboard statistic. It’s hard to feel respected when you feel reduced.”

Participant Quote—“Clara” (Gen Y):

“Respect isn’t about perks; it’s about trust. A results-oriented culture communicates respect. Blanket surveillance communicates doubt.”

Common Theme: Perceived Devaluation (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Monitoring practices were often interpreted as signals that professional judgment was undervalued.

Participant Quote—“Megan” (Gen Y):

“When every minute is tracked, it feels like they don’t respect your ability to manage your own time. It’s subtle, but it sends a message.”

Participant Quote—“Isaiah” (Gen Z):

“I felt like my experience didn’t matter anymore; only the numbers did. That’s not how you make someone feel valued. I felt like I was some factory worker in a sweatshop or on an assembly line. If I wanted to work in a factory culture, I wouldn’t have gone to Georgetown University to get my MBA. I probably would not have gone to college all.”

Participant Quote—“Clara” (Gen Y):

“Respect is about trust. When trust is replaced with surveillance, it feels like respect disappears with it. Am I a person or am I just some company asset? Does my boss care about me or does he just care about work that I produce? It just made the organizational culture feel impersonal and cold; not warm, supportive, and welcoming.”

Question 6

How have these experiences with monitoring affected your sense of organizational commitment or your desire to remain with your employer?

Common Theme: Commitment Contingent on Trust Restoration (10 out of 10 participants mentioned this concept)

Definition: Long-term loyalty became dependent on whether surveillance practices evolve.

Participant Quote—“Ethan” (Gen Z):

“I didn’t immediately want to leave, but I started imagining what it would feel like to work somewhere results-driven instead of surveillance-driven. That thought lingered. I started browsing job posting; not because I hated my job or was a slacker that didn’t work hard, but because I didn’t like how it felt to be constantly measured. I felt like I was being micro managed. The culture made me feel like my boss was a warden at a prison, not [a] supervisor who cares about my career success, growth, and wellbeing.”

Participant Quote—“Tara” (Gen Y):

“My commitment used to be emotional. Now it feels conditional. If another organization trusted me to deliver without constant monitoring, I’d seriously consider it. My loyalty used to be emotional. Now it’s pragmatic. If another company offers the same pay without constant monitoring, I’d consider leaving.”

Participant Quote—“Noah” (Gen Z):

“I want to stay where I’m trusted as a professional. Monitoring didn’t break my commitment overnight, but it weakened it. I want to stay where I’m trusted. Monitoring didn’t make me quit; but it made me question whether this is where I want to grow long-term.”

37. Discussion

The findings indicate that digital workplace surveillance operates as a relational signal, not merely as a technical control mechanism. Participants consistently interpreted monitoring as evidence that leadership questioned their professionalism, competence, or integrity, especially when surveillance was introduced without clear explanation. This finding aligns with socio-technical ergonomics, which treats technology, organizational governance, and human experience as interdependent parts of the same work system [1]. The deeper issue, therefore, is not the existence of monitoring itself, but the meaning employees assign to it within the organizational context. When surveillance is opaque or universal, employees may conclude that trust has been replaced by verification. This interpretation helps explain why monitoring can damage morale even when the organization frames it as neutral, protective, or efficiency-oriented.

The study also shows that surveillance can shift employees’ attention from work quality to digital visibility. Participants described a movement away from results-based satisfaction and toward metric-driven compliance, particularly when monitoring dashboards emphasized active time, keystrokes, or online presence. This finding extends the literature on digital surveillance by demonstrating how datafication can redefine what counts as productive work [18]. In knowledge-based roles, meaningful productivity often includes reflection, judgment, collaboration, and problem incubation, none of which is always visible through activity metrics. For example, an employee analyzing a complex client problem may appear inactive while engaging in high-value cognitive work. When systems privilege measurable motion over substantive contribution, employees may learn to perform visibility rather than pursue excellence. This creates a socio-technical misalignment between what the organization measures and what the work actually requires.

The findings further suggest that surveillance can convert intrinsic motivation into defensive compliance. Participants did not reject accountability; instead, they objected to being evaluated through systems that made them feel controlled regardless of their actual performance. Choice Theory helps explain this reaction because it emphasizes perceived agency, internal control, and the human need for freedom [27]. When employees believe they are trusted to deliver outcomes, they are more likely to experience ownership over their work. When they believe they are being continuously watched, they may narrow their behavior to what the system rewards. A practical example is an employee who stops volunteering for extra tasks or working creatively through difficult problems because the work relationship now feels transactional. The implication is that surveillance may secure minimum compliance while weakening the deeper motivational resources that support initiative, innovation, and discretionary effort.

The findings also complicate managerial assumptions embedded in digital monitoring systems. McGregor’s Theory X assumes that employees require external direction and control, whereas Theory Y assumes that employees can be self-directed, responsible, and creative under supportive conditions [69]. Participants’ responses suggest that blanket

surveillance often communicates a Theory X view of remote workers, even when leaders publicly endorse empowerment or flexibility. This contradiction can be culturally corrosive. For instance, a company may promote remote work as evidence of trust while simultaneously using software that tracks every pause, click, or idle interval. Employees then encounter a gap between organizational rhetoric and organizational design. The critical insight is that surveillance systems do not simply enforce policy; they institutionalize assumptions about human behavior.

The study's findings are also consistent with Kahn's personal engagement theory because surveillance appeared to weaken the psychological conditions that support full engagement. Kahn argued that meaningfulness, psychological safety, and availability shape whether employees bring themselves fully into their work roles [29]. Monitoring can disrupt each condition: meaningfulness is weakened when work is reduced to metrics, psychological safety is weakened when employees fear misinterpretation, and availability is weakened when cognitive resources are diverted toward managing how one appears digitally. For example, an employee who worries that a reflective pause will be recorded as inactivity is no longer fully absorbed in the task. The surveillance system becomes a parallel demand competing with the work itself. This finding matters because organizations often adopt monitoring to increase engagement, yet intrusive monitoring may produce the opposite effect by encouraging guarded participation.

The distinction between technical security and psychological security emerged as another important analytical finding. Some participants understood the legitimacy of monitoring for cybersecurity, compliance, or data protection, yet still felt more vulnerable because they did not know how the data would be interpreted or used. This distinction connects to the well-being literature that differentiates subjective well-being from psychological well-being, particularly in relation to autonomy, environmental mastery, meaning, and emotional experience [36,57–59]. A monitoring tool may make the organization technically safer while making employees psychologically less secure. For example, endpoint monitoring designed to detect malicious activity may be accepted if its purpose, limits, and safeguards are clear. The same tool may become threatening if employees believe it could be used to discipline them for ordinary fluctuations in work rhythm. The key issue is whether monitoring is governed in ways that protect human dignity as well as organizational assets.

Finally, the findings suggest that younger workers' organizational commitment is sensitive to whether telework is experienced as autonomy or controlled isolation. Participants described weakened loyalty when monitoring made them feel reduced to dashboards, data points, or behavioral traces. This finding contributes to remote work literature by showing that telework is not inherently empowering or alienating; its effects depend on the surrounding socio-technical design [7,53,65]. A remote employee who is evaluated by outcomes, trusted with flexibility, and given transparent expectations may experience telework as autonomy. A remote employee who is continuously monitored may experience the same arrangement as digitally mediated mistrust. This distinction gives the study its broader significance: surveillance does not merely observe remote work; it actively shapes whether remote work becomes sustainable, engaging, and psychologically safe.

38. Conclusions and Implications

This study concludes that digital workplace surveillance should be understood as an organizational design decision with psychological, cultural, and ergonomic consequences. The findings show that Generation Y and Generation Z employees did not categorically oppose monitoring; rather, they distinguished legitimate, targeted oversight from broad, opaque, and indiscriminate surveillance. This distinction is central to the study's contribu-

tion. Monitoring becomes most damaging when it communicates suspicion, substitutes activity metrics for outcomes, and gives employees little clarity about how data are collected, interpreted, or applied. Thus, the central conclusion is that poorly governed surveillance can erode the very trust, autonomy, and engagement that remote work systems require to function effectively.

The study advances socio-technical ergonomics by demonstrating that surveillance technologies are not neutral additions to telework environments. They recalibrate the relationship among workers, tasks, supervisors, and organizational control systems [1]. When monitoring is aligned with transparent governance, legitimate risk, and outcome-based evaluation, it may support coordination, cybersecurity, and workload management. When misaligned, it can increase anxiety, reduce psychological safety, weaken job satisfaction, and encourage performative busyness. The practical “so what” is clear: organizations cannot evaluate monitoring only by whether it increases visibility. They must evaluate whether it improves the total work system, including employee well-being, trust, performance quality, and long-term retention.

The findings imply that organizations should replace blanket surveillance with proportional, purpose-limited monitoring. Monitoring should be tied to a clearly articulated business need, such as cybersecurity, regulatory compliance, workload balancing, or documented performance concerns. It should not be used as a default substitute for managerial trust. For example, an organization may reasonably monitor access to confidential client files, but it should not automatically equate every idle moment with poor performance. A proportional model would collect only the data needed, explain why the data are needed, limit who can access them, and require human review before data influence employment decisions. This approach preserves accountability without reducing employees to continuous behavioral outputs.

The study also implies that performance management in remote work should be redesigned around outcomes rather than digital presence. Leaders should evaluate employees through deliverable quality, deadline reliability, client outcomes, collaboration, ethical conduct, and role-specific goals. Activity data, if used at all, should be treated as contextual information rather than definitive evidence of productivity. This is especially important in complex knowledge work, where valuable contributions may involve silence, reflection, mentoring, or problem solving outside visible platforms. A manager who relies only on dashboards may misread deep work as inactivity and superficial busyness as productivity. Stronger performance systems require managerial judgment, contextual interpretation, and direct communication.

The study further suggests that surveillance governance should become participatory rather than unilateral. Drawing from integrative approaches to organizational conflict, effective governance should move beyond domination or minimal compromise toward shared policy design [70,71]. Employees, managers, human resources, information technology, legal personnel, and ethics representatives should participate in defining acceptable monitoring practices. Practical safeguards should include plain-language surveillance notices, data-retention limits, employee access to relevant data, appeal procedures, periodic audits, and sunset reviews for tools introduced during emergencies. These safeguards are not merely compliance mechanisms; they are trust-building practices that help align technology with organizational values.

For leaders, the most important implication is that surveillance cannot repair a low-trust culture. If managers adopt monitoring because they assume employees are disengaged, evasive, or unproductive, the resulting system may reinforce those very tensions. A Theory Y approach would begin with the assumption that most employees want to contribute meaningfully when goals, expectations, and resources are clear [69]. Under

this model, data are used to improve the work system rather than to presume employee deficiency. For example, analytics showing delayed response times might prompt leaders to examine workload distribution, unclear priorities, or inadequate staffing before blaming individual effort. This shift moves monitoring from a disciplinary instrument to a diagnostic tool.

The study has limitations that should guide future research. Because the study used a qualitative phenomenological design with ten Generation Y and Generation Z participants, the findings provide depth rather than statistical generalizability. Future studies should examine larger and more diverse samples across industries, occupational types, organizational cultures, and levels of monitoring intensity. Quantitative research could test relationships among surveillance transparency, perceived autonomy, psychological safety, job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intention. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable because the effects of monitoring may change over time as employees either adapt to surveillance or become increasingly disengaged by it.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the defining issue in digitally monitored telework is not whether organizations can observe employees, but whether observation is designed in ways that sustain trust, dignity, and meaningful performance. Digital surveillance can serve legitimate organizational purposes when it is transparent, proportional, participatory, and connected to outcomes. However, when it is broad, opaque, and activity-centered, it risks transforming remote work from a flexible arrangement into a system of continuous suspicion. The strongest implication is that sustainable telework requires a trust-centered surveillance ethic: one that protects organizational interests without compromising the psychological and relational foundations of high-performing work.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was designed and conducted in full accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) norms, federal regulations, and ethical principles governing research involving human participants, including those articulated in the Belmont Report (respect for persons, beneficence, and justice) and applicable regulatory frameworks (e.g., 45 CFR 46). The study methodology reflects a limited-risk design. All procedures involve no more than minimal risk to participants, defined as risks not exceeding those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during routine educational, behavioral, or clinical activities. The research does not involve invasive procedures, deception that would increase risk, vulnerable populations without appropriate safeguards, or exposure to physical, psychological, legal, social, or economic harm beyond minimal levels.

Informed Consent Statement: Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Individuals were invited to participate without obligation, coercion, or undue influence. Participants were informed that they may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, loss of benefits, or adverse consequences of any kind. No financial compensation, incentives, or material benefits were offered in exchange for participation. To protect participant privacy and confidentiality, all reasonable measures have been implemented to safeguard personal information. Participants' actual names and identifying details have not been included in any study materials, reports, publications, or presentations. Data have been recorded using pseudonyms, participant codes, or other de-identification procedures to ensure anonymity. Any potentially identifying information has been stored securely and separately from research data, with access limited to authorized research personnel only. All findings are reported in aggregate or in a manner that prevents the identification of individual participants. Under no circumstances will participants' identities be disclosed in connection with the contents of this study. By agreeing to participate, individuals acknowledged their understanding of these terms and provided informed consent under the conditions described above.

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