

Electronic Performance Monitoring in Call Centers: An Ethical Decision Model

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Abstract

Ever since it emerged on a widespread basis in the 1990s, electronic performance monitoring of employees has received significant scrutiny in the literature. Call centers have been the focus of many of these studies. This particular study addresses the issue of electronic performance monitoring in call centers from an ethical perspective. The following ethical dilemma is offered: "Is it ethical for a call center manager to evaluate the performance of a call center employee using electronic performance monitoring data gathered on the employee?" Using utilitarian, Kantian, virtue, and covenantal ethical theories, the study proposes an ethical decision model and subsequently applies the model in an attempt to resolve the ethical dilemma. Recommendations for future research are then provided.

Key words

Electronic Performance Monitoring, Call Centers, Virtue Ethics, Covenantal Ethics, Interpersonal Trust

1. Introduction

The efficiency characteristics of classical management theory, which emerged in the early twentieth century primarily under the umbrella of "scientific management", addressed quantitative aspects of organizational effectiveness. Although Fredrick Taylor's "scientific management", which emphasized the importance of work methods to enhance worker productivity by breaking down work into individual tasks, may seem archaic today, it is often considered foundational to the study of organizational efficiency (Wren, 2004).

Indeed, managers in today's twenty-first century call center seem to have embraced the principles of Taylor's "scientific management" in order to achieve optimal productivity in their call center employees (Bain et al., 2002). A call center consists of both technological and human resources that provide the delivery of services over the telephone (Koole and Mandelbaum, 2002). Electronic performance monitoring (EPM) is one approach that has been widely used in call centers to improve employee productivity (Wells et al. 2007). In the late 1980s, the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment studied electronic performance monitoring and surmised that it consisted of the electronic collection, storage, analysis and reporting of information about employees' productive activities (OTA, 1987).

Research suggests that although EPM can improve organizational productivity in call centers (Alder, 1998); however, EPM can also have detrimental effects on employee well-being (Holman, 2002). Studies have attempted to address the contrasting perspectives of call center managers and employees. Most call center studies appear to have focused on the unfavorable impacts upon monitored employees (Milner et al. 2007; Barnes, 2004; Holman, 2003; Holman, 2002; Hawk, 1994). Alder (1998) approaches the issue from an ethical perspective, providing practical recommendations for call center managers. Ambrose and Alder (2000) propose a framework for evaluating EPM. Dorval (2004) addresses the issue from a legal perspective. Other call center research focuses on specific case

studies (George, 2001; Westin, 1992). McNall and Roch (2009) investigate the issue within the framework of a social exchange model.

This study extends the work of Alder (1998) and addresses the issue from an ethical perspective with specific application of ethical theories to resolve the contrasting perspectives of call center managers and call center employees as pertaining to EPM. Specifically by invoking ethical theories, this paper defines a specific ethical dilemma related to EPM in call centers, proposes an ethical decision model, and then applies the ethical dilemma to the ethical decision model. Recommendations for further research are then offered.

It should be noted that since the use of EPM in call centers is widespread in the United States (Wells et al. 2007) and U.S. legal precedent appears to cede to a company's right to improve profitability by using EPM (U.S. Supreme Court, 2010; Rustad and Paulson, 2004-2005; Corbett, 2003), this study is specifically directed to call centers in the United States.

2. Electronic Performance Monitoring

Electronic performance monitoring (EPM) is prevalent in the United States. Research within the past twenty-five years has shown a continual increase in EPM. As of 1987, approximately six million U.S. workers had all or part of their work performance evaluated by data derived from EPM (OTA, 1987). This number jumped to ten million in 1994 (Hawk, 1994) and rose to twenty-seven million by the end of 1999 (Miller, 2003). A 2001 survey by the American Management Association revealed that at least two-thirds of major U.S. firms engaged in EPM, a figure doubling from only five years prior (Corbett, 2003) and encompassing over a quarter of the U.S. workforce (Moorman and Wells, 2003). Other recent studies have indicated that 76% of organizations monitor worker web site activities, 50% review worker computer files, and 36% track employee keystroke activities (Wells et al. 2007).

More recently, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of workplace monitoring practices of a city government in a case where an employee was using a government issued pager for sending personal use text messages (U.S. Supreme Court, 2010).

3. Call Centers and Electronic Performance Monitoring

A typical call center has been in existence for approximately eight years and employs approximately forty-nine workers. A majority of call centers serve mass market customers. Almost half of all call centers provide customer service, most primarily handling inbound calls (Holman et al. 2007).

A 2001 study revealed that EPM is prevalent in call centers (ICMI, 2002). Approximately 93% of the call centers performed some form of EPM on their employees in 2001, a 5% increase from two years prior. Twenty-five percent indicated monitoring of individual employee phone calls ten or more times per month. Other types of monitoring (email, faxes and web text-chat sessions) were also surveyed. Email monitoring was the most common in internet/telecom (52%), catalog/retail (52%), and financial services (43%) call centers. Call centers also indicated that measuring employee performance (77%) and identifying additional training needs (72%) were the most important reasons for using EPM (ICMI, 2002). Holman et al.'s (2007) survey indicates that EPM is more prevalent in industrialized countries. NAQC (2010) points out that call center monitoring consists of a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures.

4. Statement of the Ethical Dilemma

Call center management goals related to EPM are directed towards employee performance. EPM can allow managers to track quantitative data such as an employee's average call time, the time spent taking calls, the type of calls taken (Holman, 2002), calls per hour, and time between calls (Bain et al. 2002). Secondly, managers can listen to employee conversations with or without their knowledge to gather less quantifiable data (Holman, 2002). Specific measures here can include a detailed analysis of the call content and how successfully the employee relates to customers (Bain et al. 2002). Thus, management goals of EPM help to ensure that employees meet prescribed quantitative metrics along with being friendly and persuasive towards their customers (Holman, 2002).

Despite the benefits EPM offers to call center managers, research suggests that EPM can have detrimental effects on employee well-being. Factors regarding EPM's impact on employee well-being include how the monitoring is administered (Moorman and Wells, 2003) or how captured data is used for performance evaluations (Hawk, 1994). If EPM is perceived to be excessive, employees may feel less satisfied (Alder, 1998; Miller, 2003), feel more depressed, become less active, feel more anxiety (Holman, 2002), and experience greater loss of personal control (Stanton and Barnes-Farrell, 1996). Furthermore, call centers focused on mass consumer markets are likely to have lower profit margins, and therefore take a cost-focused approach to service. This suggests that they are likely to adopt more standardized work practices and performance monitoring, invest less in skills and training, and offer lower pay (Holman et al. 2007).

Thus, EPM in call centers can give rise to tensions between management and employees. The tensions center on management goals of employee performance vs. employees' sense of personal well-being. This brings up an interesting dichotomy.

An EPM system that managers claim can increase employee performance could be the same system that may be perceived as unfair by the employee and thus actually contribute to reduced employee performance. Therefore if an EPM system contributes negatively to individual employee performance in a call center, then there could be ethical implications in using data from that same system to evaluate the performance of the employee. Thus the following ethical dilemma is offered:

"Is it ethical for a call center manager to evaluate the performance of a call center employee using electronic performance monitoring data gathered on the employee?"

5. Ethical Decision Model to Resolve the Ethical Dilemma

Given the offered ethical dilemma, several aspects of ethical theory, i.e., utilitarian, Kantian, virtue, and covenantal, are invoked to provide guidance for resolving the ethical dilemma. The proposed ethical decision model is shown in Figure 1.

5.1 Utilitarian and Kantian Considerations

The first steps in the ethical decision model include parallel tracks of utilitarian and Kantian considerations related to the ethical dilemma. From the manager's perspective, the model applies "act" utilitarianism theory (steps 1 through 5 in Figure 1) in that an act is morally permissible if the consequences of the act produce the greatest amount of benefit for the most persons affected by the act (Tavani, 2007). Specifically, the ethical decision model addresses the following from the perspective of the manager: benefits vs. costs, (Velasquez, 2012), harms imposed, rights exercised, and rights denied (Hosmer, 2010). Managerial goals of achieving the best possible performance levels from the employee form the basis of the utilitarian considerations in this part of the ethical decision model.

Kantian considerations follow the same process as the utilitarian track, except the employee's perspective is considered (steps 6 through 10 in Figure 1). The second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative is applied in that individuals have dignity and should not be treated merely as tools or machines " (Velasquez, 2012) and that employees are valued beyond tools and (Arnold et al. 2012). Specifically, the ethical decision model considers the duties to the individual, harms imposed on the individual, rights exercised by the individual, and rights denied to the individual (Hosmer, 2010). Respect for and dignity of the employee form the basis of the Kantian considerations in this part of the ethical decision model.

5.2 Effectiveness vs. Acceptability of Electronic Performance Monitoring

In the ethical decision model (Figure 1), utilitarian concerns and Kantian concerns can be conflicting, since aspects of "act" utilitarian theory are concerned with actions that bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people, while the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative is concerned with duties owed to individuals (Hosmer, 2010). The quest for the call center manager to gain more and more EPM information could potentially place increased burdens upon the call center employee (Alder, 1998).

Therefore, the model requires provisions to address this potential dichotomy by assessing the "act utilitarian" effectiveness of EPM (the manager perspective) vs. "Kantian (Second categorical imperative)" acceptability of the EPM actions (the employee perspective) (Godfrey, 2000), as shown in steps 10 through 12 in Figure 1. If both the manager and employee agree

ETHICAL DILEMMA

"Is it ethical for a call center manager to evaluate the performance of a call center employee using electronic performance monitoring data gathered on the employee?"

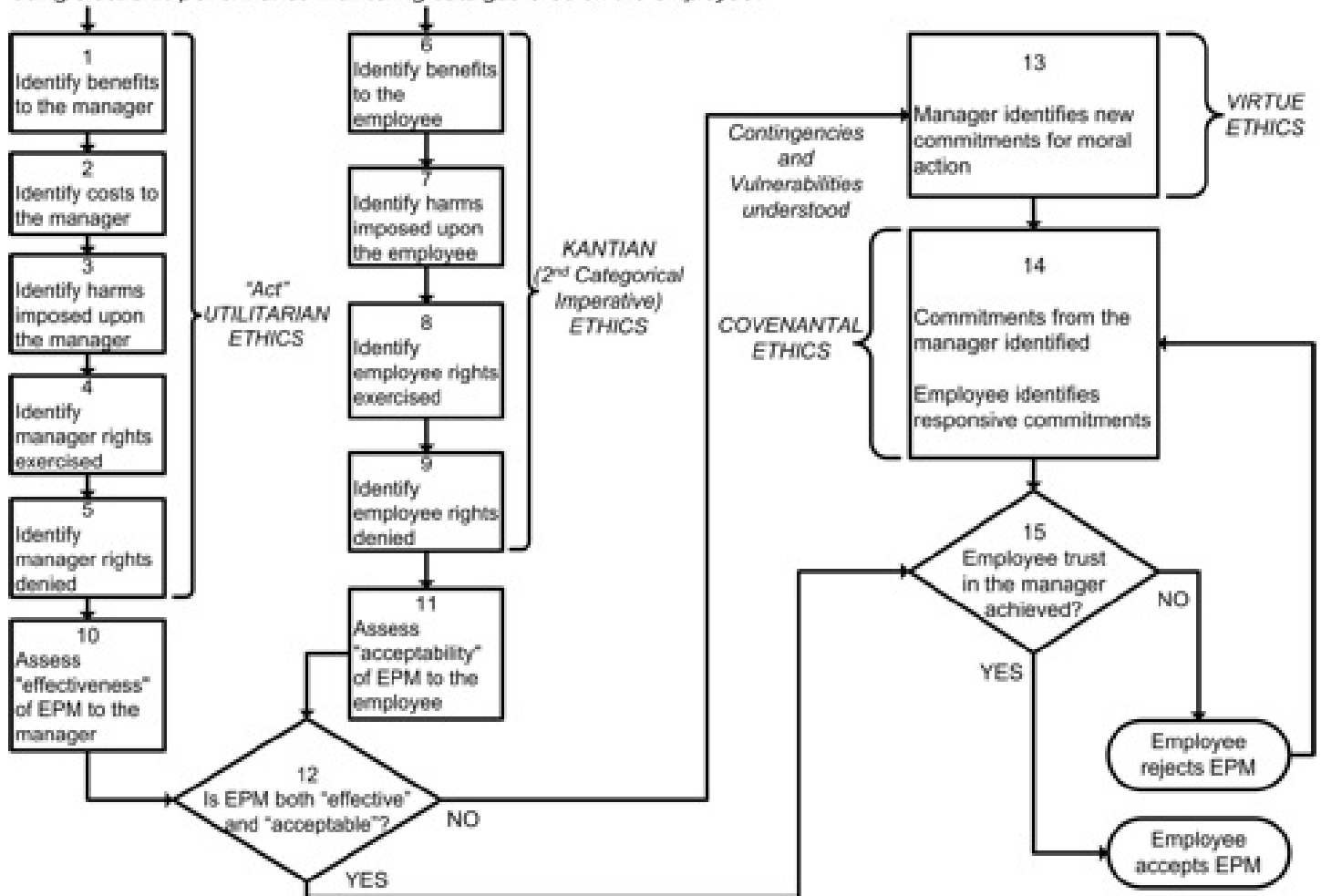


Figure 1 – Ethical Decision Model

that EPM is both effective and acceptable, respectively, then the question of employee trust in the manager is addressed (step 15 in Figure 1). If either the manager or the employee does not believe that EPM is effective or acceptable, respectively, then virtue-based ethics from a managerial perspective is applied (step 13 in Figure 1).

5.3 Managerial Virtue

Virtue theory suggests that the foundation of morality is based on one's character (Arjoon, 2000) and that one who is virtuous acts honorably (Hosmer, 2010). One is virtuous if he/she practices good moral habits (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002) and demonstrates empathy, integrity, and respect (Chun, 2005; Shanahan and Hyman, 2003). Virtue ethics "takes the concept of character ... to be central to the idea of being a good person in business (Solomon, 2003: 44). Moreover, an action is morally right if the acting agent (e.g., a call center manager) personifies a morally virtuous character (Velasquez, 2012). It is within this context that the "act utilitarian" and "Kantian (2nd categorical imperative)" contradictions related to the ethical dilemma start to be addressed within the ethical decision model (step 13 in Figure 1).

To attain the benefits of a mutually reciprocal relationship, someone must make the first move; managers are in the best position to initiate (Whitener et al. 1998). Thus in applying virtue

ethics, the model places direct responsibility upon the protagonist (the call center manager) in that if the manager practices virtuous behavior in applying EPM, such behavior will encourage monitored call center employees toward more favorable performance behaviors (Herman, 1997). Indeed, virtue is one of the most admirable traits of a manager (Whetstone, 2003).

By applying virtue ethics, the call center manager could "conceive new possibilities in an attempt to reframe the problem and avoid an unbearable situation that calls for arbitrary decisions" (Geva, 2000: 790). Thus, the ethical decision model addresses the ethical dilemma from the virtue-based managerial perspective in that call center management is called upon to identify new options for moral action (Geva, 2000).

5.4 Covenantal Ethics

In the manager-employee relationship, each side can encounter contingencies (i.e., uncontrollable actions of the other party) that result in vulnerabilities to the other party (Herman, 1997). In the ethical decision model, unresolved harms and rights denied take the form of contingencies as they flow out of the "act utilitarian" and "Kantian (Second categorical imperative)" portions of the model. These contingencies lead to vulnerabilities on the other side. To resolve these contingencies, the ethical decision model requires the manager to take the first step and attempt to address the issues from a virtue-based perspective.

Virtuous management actions then flow into a more two-sided, cooperative approach towards resolving the ethical dilemma through covenantal ethics (Step 14 in Figure 1).

Virtue-based manager behaviors lead to management commitments to the employee. These actions can be followed by subsequent employee commitments to management as shown in Step 14 in Figure 1. This may result in a specialized manifestation of a relational contract, i.e., a covenantal relationship (Barnett and Schubert, 2002) which is based on the mutual commitment to the welfare of both parties and a shared set of values (Van Dyne et al. 1994). A covenantal relationship is meant to protect the uniqueness of respective parties (Pava, 2001), show respect and concern for each other (Childs, 1995), provide a framework for collective decision-making (Stueart and Wilbanks, 1974), and strive for a healthy working relationship (Barnett and Schubert, 2002). A covenantal relationship can also provide a mediating role for building loyalty (Van Dyne et al. 1994). In addition, a covenantal relationship between a manager and an employee can foster employee behaviors that will have lasting benefits to the organization (Barnett and Schubert, 2002).

Thus in the ethical decision model, covenantal ethics attempts to subjugate any contingencies and vulnerabilities in the manager-employee relationship as pertaining to EPM. Covenantal ethics then requires accepting rather than vanquishing contingency elements in the relationship and shouldering the burdens of cooperation (Herman, 1997). In the ethical decision model, Herman's (1997) conceptualization of covenantal ethics is thus applied: (1) Commitments from the call center manager to the employee are identified; (2) Commitments (i.e., responses) from the call center employee are identified.

Furthermore, an inherent quality of a covenantal relationship is that "covenantal partners can disagree about the particulars without threatening the existence of the relationship" (Van Dyne et al. 1994: 768). This has direct implications for the ethical decision model in that the manager and the employee can disagree about the specifics of EPM and yet not adversely threaten their working relationship. The ethical decision model proposes that covenantal ethics provides the best means for the manager and the employee to cooperate with each other in a respectful way (Pava, 2001) in order to address any contingencies and vulnerabilities arising from EPM. In addition, from an organizational perspective, developing a covenantal relationship with employees can benefit the overall functioning of an organization (Barnett and Schubert, 2002), including a call-center organization.

5.5 Employee Trust in Management

For the final step of this phase of the ethical decision model to be fulfilled and flowing from the covenantal portion of the ethical decision model, employee trust is needed when EPM is used in the performance appraisal process (Childs, 1995) (step 15 in Figure 1). The ethical decision model presumes that employee trust in management is a key goal in the presence of an EPM system, since it demonstrates a commitment to building relationships of trust (Van Dyne et al. 1994). Employees can have distinct levels of trust in people at different levels of management within the same organization (Perry and Mankin, 2007). As discussed by Burke et al (2007), factors related to trust in organizational leaders include managerial competence (Mishra, 1996), support (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002); benevolence (Burke et al. 2007), and reliability (Mishra, 1996). Another factor includes the ability to provide compelling organizational direction (Hackman, 2002).

Yet with respect to EPM, trust in one's immediate manager

is even more critical, since the direct manager will have personal interaction with the employee as pertaining to EPM results. Historical studies have conceptualized trust in one's immediate manager as interpersonal trust, primarily in terms of the perceived character of the manager (Wheless and Grotz, 1977), reliable behavior of the manager (Rotter, 1980; Zaheer et al. 1998) as related to receiving rewards (Rempel et al. 1985), how safe the employee feels with respect to the manager (Wheless and Grotz, 1977), and how dependable the manager is (Rempel et al. 1985).

Interpersonal trust contextualized as a form of vulnerability has also been addressed in early literature. Specifically, interpersonal trust involves expectations of behavior of another person under conditions of vulnerability (e.g., within a manager-employee relationship) and risk (Currall and Judge, 1995). Zand (1972: 230) states that interpersonal trust is a "conscious regulation of one's dependence on another that will vary with task, the situation, and the person." Expanding upon this conceptualization, Mayer et al (1995: 712) argued that trust is "a willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that party." This suggests that the trustor (i.e., the call center employee) takes some risk since he/she is willing to accept a certain degree of vulnerability, e.g., when the employee is the subject of EPM. Indeed, Colquitt et al's (2007) study indicates a moderately strong relationship between trust and risk taking. Thus, interpersonal trust is an optimistic expectation (e.g., reliability and rewards) of the behavior of another person under conditions of personal vulnerability and dependence (Hosmer, 2010).

Ultimately, management's goal of an EPM system is to improve employee performance. There is support in the literature that employee trust in one's manager can result in improved employee performance. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) found that trust in one's immediate manager was most strongly associated with work attitudes, organizational citizenship behaviors, and employee performance. Mayer and Gavin (2005) reported that when employees have high levels of trust in their managers, they will focus more on work tasks, which suggests favorable employee performance outcomes. Madjar and Ortiz-Walters (2009) confirmed earlier research that an employee's trust in his/her manager was directly related to routine performance behaviors. Ning et al (2007) reported that an employee's trust in his/her immediate manager has positive influences on employee performance.

Therefore, the ethical decision model presumes that if employee trust in the manager is not achieved with respect to EPM, then the employee will reject EPM and not necessarily perform at his/her potential. Step 14 in Figure 1 is performed again in order for the manager-employee to readdress the contingencies and vulnerabilities arising from EPM in order for employee trust to increase. Once employee trust in the manager is achieved with respect to EPM, then the employee will accept EPM and have greater opportunity to perform at his/her potential. Overall, the organization will benefit.

6. Application of Ethical Decision Model to the Ethical Dilemma

Based on available call center research, the ethical decision model will now be applied to EPM in call centers, specifically as pertaining to the call center manager and the call center employee.

6.1 "Act" Utilitarian Considerations – The Manager Perspective

Referring to Steps 1 through 5 in Figure 1, "act" utilitarian considerations center on benefits and costs to the manager (Steps 1 and 2), harms imposed upon the manager (Step 3), manager rights exercised (Step 4), and manager rights denied (Step 5).

Regarding manager benefits and costs (Steps 1 and 2 in Figure 1), research literature shows that from the "act" utilitarian perspective, EPM directly benefits business organizations (including call centers), indirectly benefiting customers (reduced prices and better customer service) and the society at large (a more stable workforce) (Hawk, 1994). EPM can relieve managers of the tedious tasks related to employee oversight (Dorval, 2004; Stanton, 2000) increasing productivity (Lee and Kleiner, 2003). More specifically, EPM can also act as a tool for managing resources, be used to develop better training programs, and plan workloads (Aiello, 1993). It has also been suggested that EPM could help avoid legal liability and security breaches (Lee and Kleiner, 2003; Alder, 2001).

Call centers provide the organization with the opportunity to reduce costs, improve customer service, and provide greater opportunities for revenue generation using inside sales personnel (Holman, 2003). It is no surprise then that a tool such as EPM has been applied in call center organizations in order to maximize operational efficiencies. EPM can support increased call center performance through metrics tracking (Bain et al. 2002). Indeed at General Electric, customer satisfaction increased by 96% as a result of implementing an EPM system of employees who handled customer service calls (Alder, 2001). Installation of a call accounting system at a California firm resulted in a productivity increase equivalent to seven and one-half man-weeks per month (Hawk, 1994). Call center managers can also view EPM-derived performance data in real-time, thus having virtually instant access to call center employee performance throughout the workday (Richardson and Belt, 2000). One EPM system has even been applied to evaluate employee voice quality using speech recognition and pattern matching technology (Zweig et al. 2006).

In terms of using EPM data for performance evaluations, the "act" utilitarian perspective shows that benefits to management primarily relate to providing more insight into employee performance and using the obtained data to improve productivity. Feedback from EPM data can increase employee productivity since call center management can determine what mistakes an employee makes and provide advice to improve productivity (Lee and Kleiner, 2003). Call center management can also benefit from the use of EPM-derived performance evaluation data as a basis for promotion criteria and the public display of metrics as means of encouraging motivation in others (Bain et al. 2002). The result is that EPM can provide call center managers with greater control (Aiello, 1993), since EPM data provides more insight into employee performance.

Referring to Step 3 in Figure 1, harms to the manager in using EPM data for employee performance evaluation primarily center on employee reactions to monitoring that result in reductions in employee productivity. Hawk (1994) found that the more managers relied on EPM data to appraise employee performance, the less satisfied employees were with the fairness of the evaluation process. This could have direct implications in employee productivity in a call center. Yet, the call center manager may be relegated to the fact that call center employee turnover is a given and not exceedingly costly to the organization. Indeed, a recent study reported that U.S. call center annual employee turnover rate was 28%, and that annual employee turnover costs in U.S. call centers were equal to or comparably lower

in industrial countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Canada (Holman et al. 2007). Thus, harms to the company might not be as pronounced since a call center manager may assume that frustrated employees may leave the company and eventually be replaced by employees whose productivity will not be negatively impacted by EPM.

Referring to Step 4 in Figure 1, the primary right exercised by management in using EPM data for employee performance evaluation center on the right to improve productivity and ultimately greater profitability. The monitoring of metrics can lead to greater opportunities to motivate call center employees to increased productivity. Some sample metrics include speed of answer (Anton and Gustin, 2000), time spent taking calls (Holman, 2002), average call time, time between calls (Bain et al. 2002), after call work time (Anton and Gustin, 2000), and number of calls processed per employee per day (Holman et al. 2007). Thus, the key right exercised by the call center manager is increased overall call center employee performance through metrics tracking (Bain et al. 2002).

Referring to Step 5 in Figure 1, there is little empirical data regarding rights denied to management as a result of using EPM data for employee performance evaluation. Moreover despite the ethical issues of EPM monitoring, U.S. legal precedent appears to uphold a company's right to improve profitability by using EPM (Rustad and Paulson, 2004-2005; Corbett, 2003).

6.2 Kantian (Second Categorical Imperative) Considerations – The Employee Perspective

Referring to Steps 6 through 9 in Figure 1, Kantian (Second categorical imperative) considerations center on benefits to the employee (Step 6), harms imposed upon the employee (Step 7), employee rights exercised (Step 8), and employee rights denied (Step 9).

Despite the potentially unfavorable implications of EPM upon the call center employee, research does indicate that employees can also benefit from EPM (Step 6 in Figure 1). EPM may increase employee satisfaction because employees perceive that EPM results contribute to more objective performance appraisals and improved performance feedback (Moorman and Wells, 2003). Alder (2001) contends that employees electronically monitored in bureaucratic cultures may respond more favorably to EPM. Employees can also benefit from EPM as it enables them to improve their performance and develop new skills. In addition, well-being can be improved as employees derive satisfaction from the knowledge of their improved performance and from being better equipped to cope with work demands (Holman, 2002).

Pertaining to Step 7 in Figure 1, research indicates that the primary harms to the EPM-monitored call center employee relate to employee health. Hawk (1994) found that health problems occurred to a greater extent in electronically monitored employees when EPM measured a large quantity of behaviors. Specifically, opponents of EPM claim that it contributes to lowering work-life quality by making work less interesting, challenging, satisfying (Alder, 1998), and stressful (Barnes, 2004). Milner et al (2007) reported that the intensity of performance monitoring was significantly related to emotional exhaustion of call center employees. Holman (2003) noted that the perceived intensity of EPM was positively associated with anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion of call center employees. Moreover, high levels of anxiety brought about by excessive monitoring in call centers may also cause people to devote their cognitive resources to dealing with their anxiety, rather than focusing on providing quality service and thereby not performing to their full poten-

tials (Holman, 2002).

Pertaining to Step 8 in Figure 1, a primary employee right exercised (i.e., right made more certain) associated with management using EPM data for employee performance evaluation center on more objective data made available for the performance evaluation process (Moorman and Wells, 2003). The data could be perceived as less ambiguous and thus give the employee a more impartial evaluation. Indeed, it is possible that call center employees may view EPM as a performance improvement opportunity. Grant et al (1988) reported that customer service employees who viewed performance standards as attainable showed little concern about being monitored electronically; Grant et al also suggested that monitoring should play an increased role in productivity. Workers handling processed magazine subscriptions over the telephone indicated that they preferred the more objective feedback from an EPM system rather than to feedback from their supervisors (Earley, 1988). It is also possible that EPM provides the opportunity for call center employees to “develop and defend their own definitions of professionalism and good performance” (Lankshear et al. 2001: 605). Moreover, employees in process-driven bureaucratic cultures may be more accepting of EPM in the performance evaluation process (Alder, 2001).

Pertaining to Step 9 in Figure 1, a primary employee right denied (i.e., right made less certain) associated with the call center manager using EPM data for call center employee performance evaluation relates to fairness. The U.S. Office of Technology Assessment’s 1987 report (OTA, 1987) points out that EPM would be opposed or resented by employees if the employees perceived that the monitoring was unfair or if it was implemented without their participation. In fact, Hawk (1994) reported that increased reliance on EPM can result in less satisfied employees regarding fairness in the employee performance evaluation process. Furthermore given the aforementioned harms to the call center employee, using EPM to measure performance could be deemed as unfair by the call center employee.

6.3 Effectiveness vs. Acceptability

Steps 10 through 12 in Figure 1 pertain to the manager’s perceived effectiveness of EPM vs. the employee’s acceptance of EPM. If both the call center manager deems EPM as effective and, concurrently, the employee deems EPM as acceptable, then the question of employee trust in the manager is addressed (step 15 in Figure 1).

Yet as suggested in Steps 1 through 9 of the ethical decision model, there could be a myriad of conflicting perspectives with respect to EPM call centers. Areas of contradiction in terms of effectiveness vs. acceptability center on management’s desire for increased productivity from EPM-based performance appraisal processes vs. the corresponding negative employee reactions to EPM primarily due to health impacts and fairness. The key issue here is that if increased monitoring by the manager, for productivity reasons, results in the employee rejecting it as a basis of performance appraisal, due to health issues and perceived fairness. Indeed, call center employees will use coping mechanisms to deal with a perceived unfavorable EPM environment. Such coping mechanisms may affect their motivation, hence negatively impacting their performance (Stanton, 2000). As Godfrey (2000: 2) states, EPM activities are not “intrinsically acceptable or unacceptable. They become so because of employee perceptions.”

With respect to covenantal ethical theory (Herman, 1997) in the manager-employee relationship, each side can encounter contingencies (i.e., uncontrollable actions of the other party)

that result in vulnerabilities to the other party. In the ethical decision model, unresolved harms and rights denied take the form of contingencies as they flow out of the “act utilitarian” and “Kantian (Second categorical imperative)” portions of the model. These contingencies lead to vulnerabilities on the other side.

Herman’s (1997) covenantal ethical theory can be applied to call center manager-employee relationship in terms of EPM. For example, the call center manager may use undesirable EPM performance appraisal processes. This is a managerial action that is not directly controllable by the call center employee. Specifically, it represents a contingency encountered by the call center employee. As a result, the call center employee becomes vulnerable to this managerial action. In response to potential health and fairness issues arising from the EPM process, the call center employee may overtly and/or covertly reject EPM in its current form. This is an employee action that is not completely and/or directly controllable by the call center manager. Specifically, it represents a contingency encountered by the call center employee. As a result, the call center manager becomes vulnerable to this employee action.

Thus if either the manager or the employee does not believe that EPM is effective or acceptable, respectively, then virtue-based ethics from a managerial perspective is applied (step 13 in Figure 1). The ethical decision model requires that the call center manager take the first step and attempt to address the issues from a virtue-based perspective. Step 13 requires the call center manager to understand the factors influencing the EPM performance appraisal process and modify it to make the process work in such a way to achieve employee acceptability, while still retaining the managerial benefits that EPM provides in the performance appraisal process. Virtuous management actions then flow into a more two-sided, cooperative approach of resolving the ethical dilemma through covenantal ethics (step 14 in Figure 1).

6.4 Virtue Based Commitments from the Call Center Manager

Pertaining to Step 13 in Figure 1 from a virtue-based managerial approach, the call center manager can begin to demonstrate more concern for the monitored employees (Whitener et al. 1998) by striking the right balance between a rule-based EPM process and a more open and trusting EPM process (Godfrey, 2000). Specifically, virtue-based managerial commitments to the employee require the call center manager to identify new options for moral action that attempt to mitigate the harms and rights denied to the call center employee. Three aspects of virtue – empathy, integrity, and respect – (Chun, 2005; Shanahan and Hyman, 2003) could be practiced by the call center manager in terms of EPM. As informed by call center literature, these virtue-based managerial characteristics (empathy, integrity, and respect) can take the form of the following commitments to the call center employee:

1. Empathy → Managerial Commitment One → The call center manager could empathize with call center employees in terms of being monitored and allow them to participate in the implementation of the EPM system. The goal would be to have an EPM system that is mutually satisfying to both parties.

2. Integrity → Managerial Commitment Two → The call center manager could be supportive and not punitive towards call center employees when using an EPM system (Alder, 1998). This means the call center manager could act with integrity when applying the EPM system to measure employee performance.

3. Respect → Managerial Commitment Three → The call center manager could respect the perspectives of the call center employee and allow them to challenge EPM-derived data when used for the purpose of performance evaluation.

In reality, the call center manager should be willing to cede control in the EPM performance measurement process, even though it may be difficult for the manager to give it up (Houlihan, 2000). Within the general framework of these virtuous managerial actions, i.e., empathy, integrity, and respect, the call center manager can begin the process of making commitments to the employees in terms of EPM usage in the performance evaluation process. The goal is to gain favorably responsive commitments from the monitored call center employees. The covenantal ethics portion of the ethical decision model picks up from this point.

6.5 Covenantal Ethical Considerations – The Call Center Manager-Employee Relationship

With the three call center manager commitments to the employee identified, responding employee commitments to management, based on available EPM call center research, can be addressed.

6.5.1 Employee Response to Managerial Commitment One

Managerial Commitment One recommends that the call center manager could empathize with call center employees in terms of being monitored and allow them to participate in the implementation of the EPM system.

It is generally understood from human resource management literature that performance measurement practices that encourage high employee involvement often lead to improved employee performance (Batt, 2002). Employee involvement in EPM implementation whenever possible is a key employee commitment in his/her covenantal relationship with the call center manager. Indeed, call center research shows that when provided the opportunity to participate in the implementation of EPM, call center employees are more satisfied with EPM and ultimately employees performance better.

In a study of 200 telecommunications employees, Westin (1992) reported favorable employee results when employees were involved in the development of an EPM system. Alder and Tompkins (1997) indicated that if employees participate in the design and implementation of the EPM system, EPM will lead to improved individual performance. Batt's (2002) call center study found that a direct use of employee-centric individual discretion and learning lead to positive results in terms of sales. In fact, based on a study of five call center organizations, George (2001) suggested that managers can use EPM in ways that employees can tolerate it and possibly even approve of it. Moreover, Chen and Ross (2005) argue that employees should be afforded the opportunity to alter monitoring processes if they are perceived as being unfair.

More narrowly focused studies shed light on how an employee's sense of personal control affects overall satisfaction and performance. Smith et al (1992) reported that telecommunications employees felt less job control when they were electronically monitored, as compared to those who were not electronically monitored. Indeed, giving call center managers complete control over the design and implementation of an EPM system may reduce subordinates' personal control, resulting in unfavorable effects on worker attitudes and performance (Stanton and Barnes-Farrell, 1996).

In summary, the call center employee must become involved

in EPM implementation when given the opportunity to do so. This represents an employee commitment to the call center manager within their covenantal relationship and helps to provide a framework for collective decision-making. The call center manager's willingness to cede some control in the EPM implementation is matched by increased employee involvement, leading to higher employee satisfaction, and ultimately greater levels of employee performance.

6.5.2 Employee Response to Managerial Commitment Two

Managerial Commitment Two recommends that call center manager be supportive and not punitive towards call center employees when using an EPM system.

When EPM is applied as a development tool in a supportive way, favorable call center employee responses can occur. Ambrose and Alder (2000) propose that employees who receive constructive feedback based on EPM data will perceive the performance appraisal process as being more interpersonally sensitive and thus procedurally fair. In study of 347 call center employees, Holman (2003) reported that EPM can reduce stress in monitored employees if EPM is conducted in a developmental manner. Miller (2003) also suggests that EPM feedback combined with establishment of an employee development plan will be associated with greater appraisal satisfaction than would delivery of EPM feedback alone.

Favorable call center employee reactions to EPM can also occur if the call center manager acts as a supporting facilitator with respect to EPM, as opposed to using EPM punitively. EPM-derived data should be used to facilitate greater levels of performance, in place of being used punitively (Alder, 1998), and thus micromanagement practices such as "insisting that calls are handled within an exact time and excessive call scripting should be resisted" (Holman, 2002: 46). Indeed, more employee interaction with the call center manager can help alleviate the stress one may experience when being monitored electronically (Hawk, 1994). Based on a survey of call center employees, Holman (2002) recommends that monitoring practices should have a supportive and facilitative style. In fact, DeTienne et al (1993) suggests that employees be told what employee actions will be monitored, when employees will be monitored, and how the performance data will be used.

Other supportive call center manager actions can result in positive employee responses. In study based on ninety-one interviews of employees who were involved in the handling of phone calls, Chalykoff, and Kochan (1989) reported that use of constructive feedback and supervisor consideration behaviors was positively related to employee satisfaction of the EPM system. Holman's (2002) survey of call center employees found that a low level of monitoring in conjunction with a supportive team leader had favorable effects on employee well-being. EPM should measure fewer behaviors and evaluate only those behaviors most germane to indicating employee productivity and work quality (Hawk, 1994). Finally, EPM can facilitate greater levels of performance by matching the right call center employee to the right call center job (Houlihan, 2000).

In summary, there are a number of positive employee responses when the call center manager is perceived as being supportive. These employee responses are manifested as employee commitments to the call center manager within their covenantal relationship. The call center manager's willingness to not use EPM punitively, but rather as an employee development tool, is matched by increased call center employee satisfaction and, ultimately, greater levels of employee performance.

6.5.3 Employee Response to Managerial Commitment Three

Managerial Commitment Three recommends that the call center manager respect the perspectives of call center employees and allow them to challenge EPM-derived data when used for performance evaluation.

The call center manager's respect for the employee's assessment of EPM-generated performance data can help to perpetuate their covenantal relationship. A sense of fairness is built into the EPM process, helping to protect the uniqueness of the employee within the covenantal relationship (Pava, 2001). Greenberg (1986) found that soliciting input prior to the employee's evaluation and allowing employees to challenge the evaluation were key determinants in employee's perception of fairness in the performance appraisal process. In a study conducted with 251 call center employees, Moorman and Wells (2003) reported if workers perceive opportunities to challenge the interpretation and use of the feedback derived from the EPM system, then they perceived the EPM system as a fair method of monitoring performance.

Several studies indicate other benefits when call center employees are allowed to challenge the data. Hawk's (1994) research concluded that employees whose managers allowed them to challenge EPM performance data experienced less stress and had fewer health problems. Building on Hawk's (1994) findings, Ambrose and Alder (2000), in their conceptual study, suggest that formal mechanisms should be put in place to allow employees to challenge EPM data as it becomes available. Specifically, Ambrose and Alder (2000: 206) propose that "employees will perceive opportunities to challenge the computer monitoring system as more legitimate when performance feedback occurs quickly after performance than when feedback is delayed." Ball (2001) also suggests that employees should be given the opportunity to challenge EPM data.

Thus, another key employee commitment in his/her covenantal relationship with the call center manager is that the employee should recognize that he/she can challenge the performance data. This process is dependent on the call center manager's virtue-centric respect for employee opinions (Murphy, 1999). Yet, the employee must not abuse the opportunity, despite that fact that covenantal partners can disagree without threatening the existence of their relationship (Van Dyne et al. 1994). A key employee commitment to the call center manager within their covenantal relationship is the employees' commitment to challenge data in a responsible and realistic manner.

6.5.4 Summary of Covenantal Ethical Considerations

The ethical decision model suggests that EPM can thrive in call center within the framework of a covenantal relationship between the call center manager and the employee. Empathy, integrity, and respect, three aspects of virtue (Chun, 2005; Shanahan and Hyman, 2003) lead to managerial commitments to the employee which, in turn, lead to favorable performance responses (i.e., commitments) from the employee. A call center employee's perception of fairness in respect to EPM is critical in terms of the employee's performance response (Ambrose and Alder, 2000). In fact, Wells et al (2007) reported that when employees perceived EPM as means to improve their performance, they viewed EPM as fair. The employees also "reported higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and a felt obligation to reciprocate" Wells et al (2007: 133). Thus within a call center, a covenantal relationship between a manager and an employee can foster employee behaviors that will have lasting benefits to the organization (Barnett and Schubert, 2002).

However as shown in Step 15 in Figure 1, achieving employee trust in the call center manager with respect to use of EPM for performance appraisal is the ultimate goal in the ethical decision model. The final portion in the ethical decision model picks up from this point.

6.5.5 Employee Trust in the Call Center Manager with respect to EPM

A final key aspect of a covenantal relationship is that both parties demonstrate commitment to building relationships of trust (Childs, 1995; Van Dyne et al. 1994). As shown in Step 15 in Figure 1, if employee trust in the call center manager is achieved with respect to using EPM for performance evaluation, then EPM is being used effectively and both parties can benefit. If employee trust is still not achieved, the call center manager and the employee must continue to subjugate any other contingencies and vulnerabilities in their relationship as pertaining to EPM (Herman, 1997). This process continues until employee trust in the manager is achieved.

The ethical decision model suggests that employee trust in management with respect to EPM is the desired goal. As previously discussed, there are favorable organizational outcomes when employees trust their managers (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Mayer and Gavin, 2005; Ning et al. 2007; Madjar and Ortiz-Walters, 2009). However, what does this mean with respect to EPM in call centers and associated employee performance results? In other words, does high employee trust with respect to EPM lead to the employee performance goals that call center managers ultimately wish to achieve?

There appears to be minimal call-center-specific research available on the role of employee trust with respect to EPM and call center performance. Westin (1992) reported that if the trust relationship between call center employees and management is jeopardized as a result of electronic monitoring, EPM can be adapted to address the associated problems. Yet ultimately, an understanding of how increased employee trust in management translates to greater performance in the electronically monitored call center employee is needed.

One recent call center study sheds light on this subject. In a study of 257 call center representatives, McNall and Roch (2009) investigated the role of employee trust and EPM within a framework of a social exchange model. Social exchange is based on reciprocity between parties (Blau, 1964), similar to the reciprocal nature of covenantal ethics (Childs, 1995; Herman, 1997; Barnett and Schubert, 2002). McNall and Roch (2009) reported that call center employee trust in the manager was directly related to both employee satisfaction and job performance. Within the context of EPM, McNall and Roch (2009) showed that if employee trust can be attained in terms of how EPM is implemented, greater levels of employee job performance is achievable within a call center.

Thus there are indications of the importance of call center employee trust in management when EPM is used for the measurement of employee performance. More call center studies as pertaining to trust and EPM are needed. Yet drawing upon covenantal ethical theory if employee trust in management is achieved, the covenantal relationship between call center employees and call center management can help to subjugate the contingencies and vulnerabilities in their relationship as pertaining to EPM. The result would be a more cooperative and thus more mutually satisfying EPM-based performance appraisal process.

7. Responding to the Ethical Dilemma

We come back to the ethical dilemma offered at the beginning of this study:

"Is it ethical for a call center manager to evaluate the performance of a call center employee using electronic performance monitoring data gathered on the employee?"

When viewing this ethical dilemma through the lens of various ethical theories as documented in this study, the answer can be "yes." The contrasting "act utilitarian" perspectives of productivity from the call center manager versus the "Kantian (Second categorical imperative)" perspectives of individual well-being from the call center employee setup the ethical dilemma. The challenge of EPM in call centers is resolving the divergent management and employee perspectives. As discussed in this study, virtue-based managerial actions are the starting point. A covenantal relationship between call center management and call center employees then provides the mechanism to achieve an optimal EPM process that will ultimately be both effective for management and acceptable to employees. Ultimately, the goal of the covenantal relationship is that call center employees trust the call center manager in terms of using EPM for performance evaluation.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

The dichotomous "act utilitarian" manager and "Kantian (Second categorical imperative)" employee positions as pertaining to EPM in call centers have been well-documented in the litera-

ture (Alder, 1998). Yet, there appears to be minimal research available in terms of conceptualizing the issue from other ethical theoretical perspectives. This study attempted to do so. Additional research should be conducted to gain further insights.

Specifically, empirically-based call center research is recommended with respect to virtue-based managerial actions and achievement of a covenantal relationship between call center management and call center employees as related to EPM. Chun (2005) and Shanahan and Hyman (2003) provide two related conceptualizations of virtue ethics. These conceptualizations can be adopted to gain greater insight into call center employee responses to virtue-based managerial actions as pertaining to EPM.

Furthermore, Van Dyne et al's (1994) conceptualization of covenantal ethics, later applied by Barnett and Schubert (2002), could be used as way to gain more insight into a covenantal relationship between a manager and an employee in call centers where EPM is used. Alignment with Herman's (1997) conceptualization of covenantal ethics is also recommended. Ultimately, any research related to covenantal ethics should attempt to focus on employee trust as pertaining to EPM in call centers. McNall and Roch's (2009) work in terms of trust and EPM in call centers provides some key insight in this area.

Regardless of the type of studies conducted, any future call center research should attempt to gain additional perspectives into making EPM-based performance evaluation a process that is mutually satisfying to both the call center manager and the call center employee.

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