# Competing Safety vs. Privacy Issue:
The Workspace Technology Perspective

Balancing between using the technologies to keep
the workplace safe against concerning individual privacy

The Dilemma

The prevention of COVID-19 is driving governing bodies to collect vast amounts of information on individuals, from one's health status to recent travel history. Amassing such information at the workplace by employers is however subject to debate. Regardless, there is an abundance of technologies at the workplace capable of identifying the individual. Balancing between using the technologies to keep the workplace safe against concerning individual privacy should be at the core of workplace policy making.

Privacy   **VS.**   **Safety**
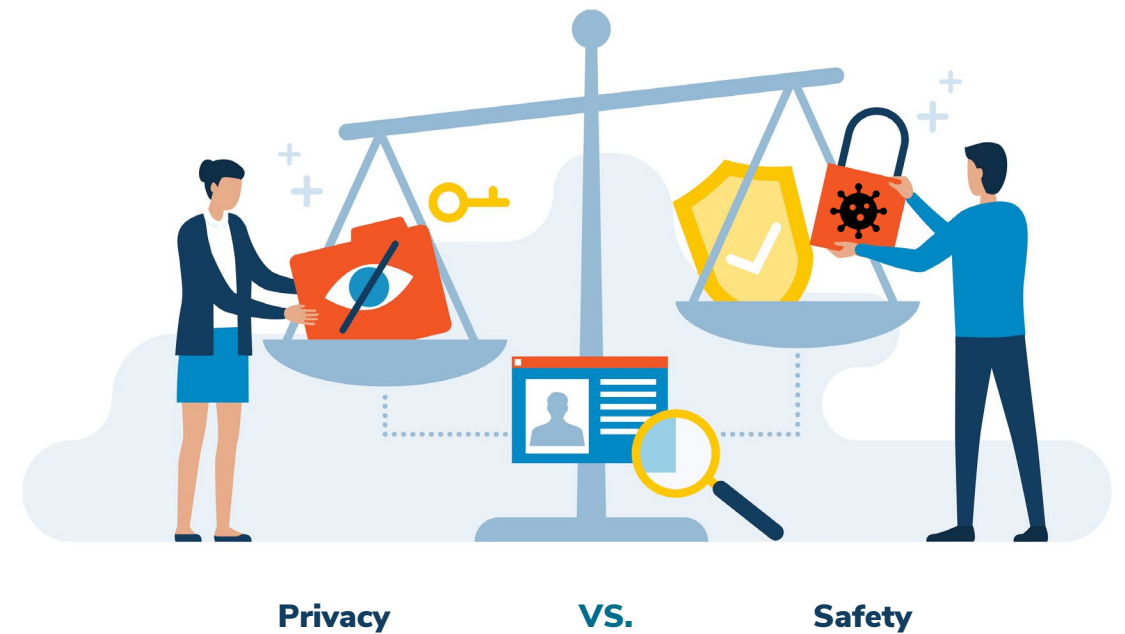
Collection: Going Touchless vs. Getting Personal

COVID-19 in a way is driving more personal data being collected on the employee.

For example, a workplace technology for optimizing space utilization is the room booking panel, a small display device at the entrance of meeting rooms that manages meeting schedules and tracks usage. Before the pandemic, employees would touch the room panels to start and end meetings. Since the outbreak, this mode of interaction has largely been discouraged to reduce the spread of virus.

Several technologies can help avoid touching the public screen.

Enable the employee to use her personal phone to interact with the room panel. This can be accomplished by having the employee scanning a QR code shown on the room panel.

Have employee check in and out by swiping her employee ID badge against the screen.

Utilize Bluetooth-based beacon technology to activate mobile apps when the employee is in the vicinity of the meeting room. All these methods allow the system to identify the person, whereas the previous touch interaction does not.

The employer has the option to disregard the personal details immediately after the interaction. In that case the system exposes no more personal information than the previous. However, the added details indeed can be utilized further for the greater good of the employees, in which case privacy indeed becomes a serious concern. There are supporters on both sides of the fence.

Identification: Contact Tracing vs. Presence at Work

Personal identity can be a useful tool for identifying people who had been in close vicinity at work with one who is found sick. Such information can be helpful to individuals so they can take proper action to seek medical assistance and isolate themselves to avoid further spreading the illness.

Prevalence of privacy guidance among 193 UN member nations

15 Directly addressed temperature checking or contact tracing in guidance

50 Issued privacy guidance and directives

Rest of the UN member nations

Source: PwC analysis based on survey of PwC privacy specialists across 47 countries, April 2020

The scope of personal data collection is larger than touchless meeting room scheduling. With the rising pandemic, many companies have their employees work from home most of the time and require a reservation before they go into the office. This allows employers to control the overall occupancy count of the office space and be able to assign work desks that are sufficiently separated apart keep social distance. "Office hoteling" has turned from a style of work into a necessity. Various technologies that enable hoteling, such as desk booking lights and sensors, turned from being a facilitator of work into an enforcer of safety rules.

Employers now have in their hands unprecedented details of how employees move about the office space. With that also comes great responsibility to ensure employee a level of security that they can trust. If managed improperly, misuse of such information can lead to employees attempting to circumvent the system in the mild case, to possible legal conflicts if employees feel their legal rights are severely violated.

Expansion: From WFH to WNH

As the pandemic progresses, many have found shortcomings with the "work from home" paradigm. An emerging trend calls for "Work Near Home" (WNH) according to Fortune, "Work from Near Home" (WFNH) by WeWork, or "Near Home Office" as Bloomberg calls it. In essence, this is an attempt to address the problems found working in isolation. Companies would enter contract with co-working spaces to allow employees to work in a setting optimized for professionalism and productivity.

We can expect employee personal information to be collected in this new paradigm, and perhaps raising more issues as a third party (the co-working space) is involved. Employees will be required to identify themselves upon arrival and departure so employers can be billed properly for the hours used. Time of entry and exit will be tracked. Also, personal health information, whether collected in the form of a survey or measured by body thermal scanners, may be required upon entrance to ensure the safety of other people at the location.

New terms are already emerging that describe the fact that employees should be able to work from anywhere: They include work from office (#WFO), work from near home (#WFNH), work from home (#WFH), work from a third or fourth place flex (#WF 3rd/4th Place Flex).

Wework How the world's leading companies are responding to COVID-19

It can be expected that, in months to come, a new set of rules will emerge to answer the following: What are a common set of personal information that the employee, employer, and the third-party space can all agree on to be collected? To what extent does the third-party have into the employee data? Is it allowed to use the data to personalize its accommodation services? Is it allowed to make use of anonymized data for optimizing its operations, and perhaps even provide to an affiliate to enhance its services?

Conclusion

The issue concerning privacy deeply involves regional laws and consensus of the people. Some cultures tend to value the safety of the collective population higher than the privacy concerns of the individual, and vice versa.

Perhaps the way forward is justly summarized by Jennifer King, director of privacy at Stanford University's Center for Internet and Society as she told CNN Business in an interview:

" I think the question might be whether the means justify the ends, I'd want to hear a clear justification as to why some of the requests for personal data are being made, and why other methods might not work as well or reasonably well without the privacy impact. "

As the efficacy of any policy depends largely on the trust people have in it, any attempt to accentuate the fine line drawn between safety vs. privacy will help advance us together to better combat the pandemic.

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