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Short Communication

The Ethical Implications of the Overuse of Technology in the Business World

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ABSTRACT

The embedding of technology in the business world is a benefit from many perspectives. Its overuse, however, can lead to the undermining of trust and, in some instances, result in the demoralization and dehumanization of the employee. One must ensure that its use does not hinder the professional ambition and goals of our workforce.

Keywords: Technology; Business; Ethics; Trust

INTRODUCTION

The level of use of technology must be guided by a factor of trust. Trust is essential for ethical behavior in the professional world. We will examine the possibilities of the overuse of technology and how it can undermine trust in the business world. One form of trust can be based on the confidence one places in another and another form of trust can be based on the honesty of one person to another [1].

Patrick Lencioni, famed business management consultant and author, has pointed out the foundational nature of trust in team dynamics. Lencioni identifies five dysfunctions of a team: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. On his model, each dysfunction invariably leads to the next. Absence of vulnerability-based trust, the kind of trust when team members are not being open, honest, and truthful with each other, will cause team members to fear and therefore refrain from engaging in conflict around ideas. In the absence of this trust, the team completely avoids conflicts around ideas, there is no constructive debate, and the team therefore achieves inferior results. Fear of conflict, in turn, leads to a lack of commitment. As there has been no real debate around ideas, team members have not weighed in on a subject, and no real buy-in occurs. Ambiguity prevails. Lack of commitment, thus, results in team members not holding each other accountable. Lastly, when a team member does not feel accountable, he will tend to put his own individual needs ahead of team goals. Lencioni's recommended solution to these dysfunctions is to turn the pyramid on its head and begin by having the team establish trust. Trust will lead to willingness to engage in conflict, which will lead to commitment, and so forth [2].

Of course, work teams of all kinds, functional, cross-functional, self-directed, integrated product, and virtual exist contemporaneously in today's world of work, even within one single business organization. The conventional wisdom is that teams make us more creative and productive and yield better quality products and services. Team members from diverse backgrounds can discuss and weigh alternative solutions to a problem, and this, except when team are dysfunctional, leads to the best possible solution, or, at any rate, to a solution better than one at arrived individually. The success of the organization depends in no small way, therefore, on the success of its various teams; the foundation for this success is trust.

To be sure there are organizations structured around individual rather than team effort. But in these instances, too, it is easy to see that trust between management and its employees and between the employees themselves is of the essence. Without trust, employees will tend to put their own needs ahead of organizational needs and the needs of their peers; there is likely to be more politicking and backstabbing, not to mention higher turnover, and the organization will consequently perform more poorly.

Business appears to be crossing ethical boundaries as it overuses technology. Consider, for example, the practice of delivery services, which require their drivers to install and run applications such as Mentor, which touts itself as a provider of "a driver risk management program helping organizations reduce collisions, injuries, license violations, and total cost of fleet ownership" [2]. Mentor uses smartphone sensors to "collect and measure driver behaviors most predictive of risk," actions such as a driver's harsh acceleration, abrupt braking, speeding, harsh cornering and distractions, and also records time when the driver's seat belt is off and the number of times she/he uses the reverse gear. Mentor markets its product to

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delivery fleets, sales fleets, service fleets, and corporate families [2]. By partnering with industry analytics leader, FICO, the application is able to render a daily FICO score and depict driver performance vs. that of the team and organization, which the company and or the driver's manager can use to motivate safe driving. Mentor also guarantees a reduction in collisions by 20 % [3]. All of this we think, even if it succeeds in reducing the collision rate by 20 %, undermines employee trust and is likely to decrease motivation, and loyalty and result in higher turnover. Moreover, even if it does reduce risk and even if it does save the organization collision related expenses it does so at the ethical expense of putting Big Brother in the delivery truck with the driver, dehumanizing the driver and violating his/her trust.

Similarly, the practice of many call center operations and insurance companies, some using work from home models, treat their employees like robots, monitoring the time they spend on calls (one of the common metrics used is "call handle time"), restroom breaks, and what they actually say on client calls frequently monitored by management, often without advance notice to the employee. If an employee spends too much time writing up notes on a call or taking an unscheduled restroom break it is considered "call avoidance." Employees feel tethered to their computers. Arguably these metrics should not be used just because technology can deliver them. Ultimately, the use of such metrics by management is demoralizing and dehumanizing, and we suspect, causes employee dissatisfaction, disloyalty and exit through a revolving door. One wonders if management really cares, as employment opportunities today, during the pandemic, are scarce, and employees can be easily replaced. One wonders also whether these companies have really measured the benefits (i.e. done a cost benefits analysis) attributable to time compelled on the line with customers against the cost of replacing employees who leave on that account. Again, even if a cost benefit analysis favors this practice it does so at the ethical expense of dehumanizing the employee and violating his/her trust.

CONCLUSION

Trust is the essence of positive work environments. The relationship between a supervisor and his workforce is built on mutual respect and confidence. Our contention is that the use of technology in the professional environment to a beneficial degree is a good thing, but all aspects of its use need to be considered.

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