



Wearables in the Workplace

Heledd Winfield-Straker, Innovation Specialist for People & Talent at PA Consulting, debates the future of tracking technology and asks whether it will incite positive change or an Orwellian nightmare

From Fitbits and smart watches, to virtual reality glasses and implants, the swift expansion of the wearables market – which soared 200 per cent in Q3 2015 – indicates that we are ready to embrace the next stage of digital evolution.

This technology is set to transform organisations, with many employers considering the use of this technology to improve workforce productivity and wellbeing.

This raises a number of controversial questions, as it gives leaders and managers the power to closely watch staff by referring to a gadgets that hold

a wealth of data on them. Already there have been examples in which workplace tracking technology has not been well-received.

For example, Britain's daily Telegraph newspaper quickly removed devices that monitored whether, and for how long, staff are at their desks after a backlash from unions and employees.

Yet gadgets can give staff the power to improve their work-life balance. Imagine how enriched lives would be if employers supported staff in the use of data that tracked their energy patterns and psychometrics in order to build a personal experience, which

enabled them to work anywhere, anytime, and on anything they chose.

However they are used, it seems inevitable that wearables will become a feature of the workplace over the next few years. The technology is too new to foresee or manage the impact it might have, but here I offer my recommendations together with some questions leaders should ask about the technology.

Perception is Everything

History and the media are awash with stories of organisations and governments trying to control their people, often with the justification >



that the goal is to help them. So contentious is the idea of wearables that just saying the word 'track' could make employees run for the hills.

As a result, engaging people from day one in planning the implementation of wearables is key.

Ask employees what data they would be willing for you to access and for what purpose. What control do they want over their own data? What does transparency of data use mean to them? You may think you're an open window, while they see you as a closed door. Even unfounded suspicion can damage trust, so get this one right.

Data is Mightier Than the Sword

Big data is lauded as the answer to all our problems, particularly those relating to the seemingly nebulous human heart. However, it takes skill to wield the sword of data. Making decisions based on poor data – or bad decisions based on good data – can raise all kinds of ethical and legal issues.

Imagine a wearable detects an employee's anomalous heart pattern and it is ignored as a symptom of stress, but the employee is later hospitalised with a heart condition. Is the company liable? If the employee knew about their condition and didn't register it with their company health insurance, does this become a compliance issue? And what happens if that data is hacked or lost? What should be the security protocols for protecting and retrieving data?

In all cases, a company needs both significant data science capability and a

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robust legal and ethical infrastructure to manage data appropriately and protect both the organisation and its employees.

Technology Doesn't Have a Moral Compass

Mike Weston, CEO at data science consultancy Profusion – which co-hosted an event with us on this subject – described a recent experiment which used wearables to spot the early onset of disease in cows in order to maintain a healthy herd. But should humans be tracked in the same way as cattle?

Humans are naturally reductionist and tend to categorise information, including that about other people. Data makes a great box in which to put people. This means when it comes to making data-based decisions it can be easy to see people in a similar way to cattle.

Let's look again at the example of an employee with a heart condition. Would the employee's rights be violated if the company informed the health insurer? Should the employer tell the employee of their condition, if not on legal grounds then on ethical ones? What is the importance of human interaction? For example, what would the hospitalised employee value more – a detailed

report on how to improve their life or for someone to visit them in hospital?

Some ethical and social considerations are obvious, but as wearables and their associated data become integrated into our lives 'doing the right thing' may become increasingly unclear.

Many organisations do not yet have a handle on big data as a concept, let alone the swathe of data that will come with tracking technology. If an employer decides to make the leap to wearables, they must first think about protecting employees' trust, investing in the required skills and infrastructure, and keeping the focus on doing the right thing ■

This article first appeared as a blog on PA Consulting's Talent and Change [website](#)

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