

# Is it ethical to monitor users? [closed]

Asked 16 years, 2 months ago   Modified 9 years, 9 months ago

Viewed 1k times



11



As it currently stands, this question is not a good fit for our Q&A format. We expect answers to be supported by facts, references, or expertise, but this question will likely solicit debate, arguments, polling, or extended discussion. If you feel that this question can be improved and possibly reopened, [visit the help center](#) for guidance.

Closed 12 years ago.

I didn't know I would be getting too many replies so fast. I can provide more details. It is definitely for use within the company. I was looking for some info on whether I should be more careful or anything to watch out for...

My boss is asking me to put some tracking info on what users do with their application. It is not about collecting sensitive data but there might be some screenshots involved and I am not sure if this is a breach of privacy.

Would love to hear any thoughts on this or if you handled something similar.

security

tracking

privacy

corporate-policy

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edited Mar 1, 2015 at 22:34



Kevin Brown-Silva

41.6k ● 42 ● 206 ● 242

asked Sep 25, 2008 at 23:15



dragon

247 ● 2 ● 4 ● 16

- 
- 1 Collecting screenshots is the same as installing a keylogger. However, if you DO install a keylogger with your application, add a counter to your app telling the user how much money you've already stolen from there bank account. <-- joke  
– user142019 Dec 19, 2010 at 10:26
- 

No, it is not ethical to monitor devs asking questions on a stack-overflow, no matter how simple their question is, and judge their performance based on the questions they asked.  
– 3xCh1\_23 Jan 6, 2020 at 15:00

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23 Answers

Sorted by:

Highest score (default)



10



At work, there is no privacy. Think of it this way, if you work for a financial institution, or a government one, monitoring users may be the difference between keeping sensitive information secret and not. (I want my personal information kept private). They are paid to do work at work. If they are afraid about what they are doing is wrong, then they shouldn't be doing it.

A comment brought up a good point. If you are selling the product and spying on end users, that is totally different.

That is highly unethical to take screen shots and report them back to the company. Actually where I work, we'd have you arrested for it if we found out. (yes, you'd be violating a federal law, and I guarantee we'd go after everyone and sort out the mistakes later.) That is a very slippery slope.

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edited Sep 25, 2008 at 23:30

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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:17



[kemiller2002](#)

115k ● 28 ● 199 ● 253

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Is he actually talking about monitoring employees? Sounds like he's spying on end-users of his product. – [Landon](#) Sep 25, 2008 at 23:26

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The Law + jurisprudence + union contract + company policy (when not in contradiction to the above) is what determines what is acceptable. It is not a matter of opinion. It is not a matter of being afraid either. And doing something illegal even to catch some illegal activity is not good. – [Francesca](#) Sep 25, 2008 at 23:32

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Francois, I absolutely agree with you. I am merely saying in my line of work it is against the law. – [kemiller2002](#) Sep 26, 2008 at 0:08

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5

If you mean users at large, yes it's a breach of privacy.

If you mean users internal to your company (workers), then no -- there should be no expectation of privacy in the



workplace.



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:19



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[Serafina Brocious](#)

30.6k ● 12 ● 91 ● 115

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1 Not necessarily---it depends on state law and the employment contract. Recording screen shots at work can be illegal monitoring. You should check with a lawyer first.

– [vy32](#) Nov 17, 2009 at 3:37

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How far does this logic extend? Is it ethical for an employer to observe bathroom stalls because in some dry sense "there should be no expectation of privacy in the workplace?"

– [eyelidlessness](#) Oct 30, 2010 at 7:48

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4

Sometimes it is good to collect some metrics and will help in enhancing the user experience. Once, we were able to prove that a certain functionality was never used and we were able to remove support for it. For screenshots, you should be careful to take only the required window instead of a full screen.



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:18

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[Gulzar Nazim](#)

52.2k ● 26 ● 130 ● 170



2

If the application is used internally within your organization, and you have a corporate policy that states "no expectation of privacy" that has been communicated to and signed by your users then there is no issue.



Monitoring the actions of employees within a business in the US is very common practice.



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:19

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randy

356 ● 1 ● 4



Legal issues aside, do you want to work at a company that takes screenshots of your desktop?

2

Even if legal, this behavior is sure to drive away developers. Remember, in a bad work environment often the best developers leave first; they have the best job prospects.



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:54

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Jason Cohen

83k ● 26 ● 110 ● 114



Here's a corollary example: would you want your boss taping and listening to phone calls you made from the office? You don't give up every right you have just by cashing a paycheck.

2



Even if this screen capture methodology is legal, it certainly isn't ethical and will absolutely damage the morale of employees by demonstrating that they cannot be trusted.



It's just a bad idea. There have got to be better ways of accomplishing your goals than this.

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answered Sep 26, 2008 at 17:21

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**KevDog**

5,803 ● 9 ● 45 ● 74



Screenshots? If it's not opt-in, I'd say that's a pretty clear breach of privacy.

1



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:18

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**Paul Dixon**

300k ● 54 ● 314 ● 349



I made a simple CMS in PHP and I had to store all actions of users, but it's a completely different situation. In my opinion what is asking your boss is a bit out of privacy, especially if in your application you don't mention to the user this kind of behavior.

1



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**Enrico Murru**

2,331 ● 4 ● 21 ● 24



On a work machine? Absolutely; as long as the users know the extent to which they are being monitored. It's their choice to work for the employer, and they are using

1 the employer's equipment.



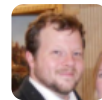
If you *don't* notify them that they are being watched, then that is kind of a "grey area"....depending upon state lawss, it may even be *illegal* - depending on what sort of information you are monitoring.



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:20

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BKimmel

611 ● 8 ● 13



1

Something that would help on clarification would be is this an internal company application or something that will be on user's personal computers.



Typically when it comes to computers that are owned by the company, if the company decides to do monitoring, it is their choice. Disclosure of the monitoring is often encouraged in an effort to be open and honest, but is not mandatory. A user should not have any expectation of privacy when using equipment owned and managed by the company.



This is not just a matter of custom built applications, but also web browsing, email, phone conversations, etc. If you are using company resources then you are releasing your privacy.

If this is an application going to users outside of the company, then yes it is wrong without permission by the

users.

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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:28

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ManiacZX

867 ● 1 ● 6 ● 11



1



That is greatly depending on the country you are in and what information you are collecting and what you do with it.

There is a huge difference between the US and EU for instance.



The Law, jurisprudence, union contracts and company policy (when not in contradiction to the above) are what determines what is acceptable.

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edited Sep 25, 2008 at 23:38

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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:21



Francesca

21.6k ● 5 ● 52 ● 91



1



If its for an internal app its completely ethical.

Beyond disclosing to all users that their use of the apps is monitored there is no other obligation of disclosure(excepting federal contracts and union contracts).







What is most important about capturing this kind of data is to focus on capturing the absolute least amount necessary - capturing screenshots of all open windows plus any adjacent data streams does in fact incur liability issues (think HIPPA) as well as producing a mountain of data that no one will ever look thru until a lawyer requests it with a subpoena and you're asked to go thru it and redact all Names, DOB, and SSNs in 160GB of data.

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answered Sep 26, 2008 at 0:10

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[kloucks](#)

1,549 ● 9 ● 11

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Completely ethical? Really? I do not think that means what you think it means. If you live in the USA it's perhaps not not completely unethical, but that's not the same thing.

– [Robert Paulson](#) Oct 11, 2008 at 5:51

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@Robert: Really! Yes Completely! But please do tell me what you think ethical means. – [kloucks](#) Oct 18, 2008 at 22:14

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1

Seems this has already been answered, but it should be noted that there are countries where this is illegal, even at a place of work.



For instance, in Switzerland it is illegal to track which websites each user has been visiting.



Other than specific laws to the contrary, I would agree that it is acceptable to do, since there should be no reasonable expectation of privacy at the workplace. That said, informing the users is the right thing to do.

One other caveat, if the data you are collecting is sensitive enough that an attacker would have use of it (say, the screenshots include CC numbers), then you must ensure that this information is well protected. (I'm not referring to the user's information, but say the bank's clients' account details.)

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answered Sep 26, 2008 at 12:51

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AviD

13.1k ● 7 ● 64 ● 93

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I'm dumbfounded by the fact that many people give up their right to privacy so easily. Where I live, just because somebody pays me for something, doesn't confer them special rights unless I willing give them up. What a sad world the others must live in. – [Robert Paulson](#) Oct 11, 2008 at 5:37

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I am actually quite the outspoken proponent of privacy, and kinda concur with your sentiment in general - however, there is no explicit "right to privacy" at the workplace, with regards to your actual work (not including your actual private self at the location of work...) – [AviD](#) Dec 18, 2008 at 1:20

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0



If it is done without the user's consent, then it is definitely a breach of privacy. Even with the user's consent, it must be made clear exactly what information is being passed back. If the screenshot was to grab the whole screen, not just a window, then you could potentially get all kinds of private info.



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:20

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flash

386 ● 4 ● 15



0

Is this an internal app or a something for the public? If it's internal, it's not unethical, even if it's scummy, to monitor users.



If it's something for the public, in order to not be sleazy:



- the user has to be able to opt-out
- no personally identifying data can be collected
- only data about your app (not screenshots of the entire screen) can be collected

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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:22

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J.T. Grimes

4,272 ● 1 ● 29 ● 32



0

It really depends on exactly what is being collected, the disclosure, and if the program could be opted out of. If that passes the smell test, then ensuring the reporting does not provide an attack vector and the data is appropriately safeguarded becomes your concern. If things seem shady get some written 'feature request' to CYA. The basic idea, if done right, is nothing new. Microsoft, for instance, does it with some of their products.



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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:23

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CheeZe5

995 ● 1 ● 8 ● 24



0

In a work environment, I think it is OK as long as all employees know that they may be monitored. I've seen places (Intuit was one) where employees are tracked all day. Not my cup of tea, however.



In government facilities, there is typically some sort of login screen that states that anything and everything done on that machine is subject to monitoring.

If these are applications that are run by the general public, I'd say that it better be crystal clear that you are collecting data on them. Personally, I'd rather not have programs 'phoning home' with info about my activities, boring as they may be.

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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:27

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itsmatt

31.4k ● 11 ● 102 ● 165



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If the client is external, this should be disclosed to the client. Actually, if the client is internal OR external, if you do not disclose it, it is totally unethical.



An employment agreement that states that there can be no expectation of privacy constitutes disclosure.



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edited Sep 25, 2008 at 23:30

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answered Sep 25, 2008 at 23:19



[user19113](#)

1,228 ● 1 ● 9 ● 12



0

Screenshots? If it's not opt-in, I'd say that's a pretty clear breach of privacy.



you've opted-in by cashing your paycheck :)



as many indicated, informing the user is the best the company can do. **Informing**, not asking to Opt-In.



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answered Sep 26, 2008 at 0:19

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[roman m](#)

26.6k ● 31 ● 104 ● 136



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I would suggest reading: [Privacy](#). My interpretation is that people will expect some things to be kept private such as their personal information. By interacting with your sites, users are sharing information with you that you should be able to use but not distribute or abuse as if it was your own.



Screen shots is obviously the hot button issue here. While users entering information into a text input field are knowingly giving you information, screen shots go beyond what a typical user would expect and therefore should be disclosed to the user through a privacy policy.

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answered Oct 11, 2008 at 5:26

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Brandon

6,872 ● 11 ● 40 ● 50



Collecting *anonymous* usage should be doable without screenshots.

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If your app collects *any* data that is meant to be protected by privacy laws, then you will have to treat the screenshots as containing sensitive information and protect them accordingly. Data protection laws are pretty strict in most countries.



Unless you have a really really small company, privacy laws vary a lot between countries, and the feature is probably more trouble than it's worth. In any country I've even lived in, that idea would never fly.

But don't ask a bunch of hacks on a site like stack overflow. Seriously, ask a lawyer.

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answered Oct 11, 2008 at 6:04

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Robert Paulson

18k ● 6 ● 36 ● 53



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I think the question is still a bit vague as to who is going to be monitored for what. From what I understand who'll be monitored are the end users who are using the application and the gathered data will be used internally.



Assuming this is the case, I think, I can contribute the following answer:



If you are going to monitor end users to see how they are using your product, you are in human factors/user experience business and what you want to do is really an experiment. Doing such an experiment requires **consent** of the **subject** (the end user). In an academic setting (and I think the same goes for industry as well), there is an Institutional Review Board (IRB) which grants permission for such experiments. I believe in the industry scene there are similar organizations (just not sure what they are called). A request for permission for such an experiment is accompanied by a report which details the user experiment in a very specific manner. The IRB then decides whether to issue a permit or not.

The important point is the consent here and users should know about the experiment and agree to be subjects. I think, in the absence of a user consent the experiment is neither ethical nor legal. Again, I approached this based on an assumption and tried to summarize my experience in such experiments.

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answered Oct 11, 2008 at 6:33

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Turker

619 ● 5 ● 6



Collecting screen shots may be illegal even if employees are notified. This is an issue of local law and federal law. You haven't said which country you are in. In California,

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for example, monitoring screens might violate both workplace privacy laws and wiretap laws. You should get an opinion of your corporate attorney before implementing this.



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answered Oct 5, 2009 at 5:41

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vy32

29.6k ● 37 ● 134 ● 261

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