

# Snooping Software

## Management Professor Debbie Ballou Reviews Software for Monitoring Employees

To help firms monitor the on-line activities of their employees, products like SurfWatch, CommandView and Telemate. Net collect massive amounts of data about what web sites employees are visiting, what phone numbers they're dialing and what they are communicating via email.

Yes that's right: Your boss could be reading your email! And, this so-called "snooping software" is invisible to employees who may or may not know that they are being monitored.

Managers use snooping software to get information about their firm's most active Internet users, the amount of time employees spend on the phone and the frequency and content of employees' email messages.

One of the key features of these products, says Management Professor Debbie Ballou who reviewed the snooping software for Notre Dame Business, is the tremendous flexibility managers have to specify what kind of information they want to see. "They can ask for reports on specific employees, reports on specific time periods, reports including only one type of information (such as email content) or reports that are more comprehensive (statistics about email, Internet and phone use)," says Ballou.

"This flexibility has some benefits but many drawbacks," she says. "Managers should not be given free reign to make their own monitoring decisions." Ballou provides some reasons:

Research shows that flexible query and reporting systems can lead to confusion and inefficient information searches on the part of managers, leading them to make poor decisions. Managers are human, and their biases influence their search for and perceptions of monitoring data. This makes it more likely that a manager will monitor an employee he or she dislikes more often and will perceive more policy infractions. Managers are not typically "report design" experts; they may ask for data in a format that obscures important information.

Given these potential pitfalls, how can organizations use monitoring software fairly and wisely? "They should implement and design monitoring standards and practices with the full knowledge and participation of their employees. Research has shown that employee perceptions of fairness in the design and implementation of these systems substantially influences their acceptance," says Ballou. "If a company chooses to use snooping software, the company's leadership should develop consistent, organizationally mandated monitoring practices and reports that inform and guide their managers."

*Management Professor Debbie Ballou's research interests include the impact of computerized business systems on the behavior of organizations and their employees. She teaches a popular MBA course, Frontiers of Electronic Commerce, which examines ways in which managers can effectively use technology to enhance their organization's competitive position.*