The Guardian Weekly

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Firms tag workers to improve efficiency

Level 3 | Advanced

1 Key Vocabulary

Fill the gaps using one of these key words from the text:

tag	surveillance	safeguard	beam (vb)
theft	monitor (vb)	ethical	warehouse

1. _____ means relating to beliefs about right and wrong.
2. If you _____ someone or something, you regularly check their development or progress.
3. _____ is the crime of stealing.
4. _____ is the careful watching of someone, especially by an organisation like the police or the army.
5. A _____ is a large building where goods are stored.
6. If you _____ information, you send it by means of electronic equipment.
7. An electronic _____ is a small device that enables a person to be located.
8. A _____ is a measure that protects people from being harmed.

2 Prediction

Which 5 of the activities in this list do you think will be mentioned in the article?

1. instructing employees to collect goods from warehouse shelves
2. sending orders from stores to warehouses
3. telling employees when to start work and when to stop work
4. checking whether workers are taking unauthorised breaks
5. checking that employees are wearing the right uniform
6. finding out when employees are outside the building
7. working out the shortest time it takes an employee to complete a job
8. monitoring the productivity of secretaries

Now look in the text and check your answers.

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David Hencke

Workers in warehouses across Britain are being “electronically tagged” by being asked to wear small computers to cut costs and increase the efficient delivery of goods and food to supermarkets, a report revealed this week. New US satellite- and radio-based computer technology is turning some workplaces into “battery farms” and creating conditions similar to “prison surveillance”, according to a report from a professor of geography at Durham University, Michael Blakemore.

The technology, introduced from the US at the start of the year, is spreading rapidly, with up to 10,000 employees using it to supply big retail chains. Now trade unionists want safeguards to be introduced to protect worker privacy.

Under the system workers are asked to wear computers on their wrists, arms and fingers, and in some cases to put on a vest containing a computer that instructs them where to go to collect goods from warehouse shelves. The system also allows direct access to the individual’s computer so orders can be beamed from the store. The computer can also check on whether workers are taking unauthorised breaks and work out the shortest time a worker needs to complete a job.

Academics are worried that the system could make Britain, which already has the largest number of street security cameras, the most surveyed society in the world.

In his report for the GMB union, Professor Blakemore said the new technology was raising a host of ethical issues, with the danger that the computer was taking over the human rather than humans using computers. There is also concern that the new technology might create industrial injuries because of the need for workers to make repetitive movements with their arms and wrists, similar to repetitive strain injuries caused by overusing computers.

But the companies say that the system makes the delivery of food more efficient, cuts out waste, reduces theft and can reorder goods more quickly. A spokeswoman for one supermarket chain insisted that the company was not using the technology to monitor the staff and said it was making employees’ work easier and reducing the need for paper.

But at the GMB’s annual conference in Newcastle this week one of the union’s national officers, Paul Campbell, said: “We are having reports of people walking out of jobs after a few days’ work, in some cases just a few hours. They are all saying they don’t like the job because they have no input. They are just following a computer’s instructions”.

Other monitoring devices are being developed in the US, including ones that can check on the productivity of secretaries by measuring the number of key strokes on their word processors; satellite technology is also being developed to monitor productivity in manufacturing jobs.

The Guardian Weekly 10/06/2005, page 9

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3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the information in the article.

1. Why are academics worried about electronic tagging in the workplace?
a. because worker privacy will not be protected.
b. because workplaces will be like prisons.
c. because Britain might become the most surveyed society in the world.

2. What does the supermarket spokeswoman say about the benefits of electronic tagging?
a. it makes employees' work easier and reduces the need for paper.
b. it enables the company to monitor staff carefully.
c. it is cheaper.

3. What do trade unions want?
a. more input by employees.
b. the introduction of safeguards to protect worker privacy.
c. measures to prevent industrial injuries.

4. What is the main aim of asking workers to wear electronic tags?
a. to monitor their movements.
b. to increase the efficient delivery of goods and food to supermarkets.
c. to check whether workers are taking unauthorised breaks.

4 Vocabulary - opposites

Use prefixes to form the negatives of these adjectives:

1. efficient _____
2. similar _____
3. direct _____
4. authorised _____
5. ethical _____
6. overused _____
7. productive _____
8. repetitive _____

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5 Vocabulary - Find the word

Look in the text and find the word or phrase that means:

1. an injury caused by a repeated action
2. a very large number
3. a joint which links the arm and the hand
4. to leave a job suddenly
5. farms where chickens are kept in very small cages
6. very quickly
7. a sleeveless shirt
8. to eliminate or remove

6 Grammar - Present continuous passive

Look at this example from the text:

Workers are being electronically tagged.

This form is used to describe a current activity (present continuous) where the subject is either unknown or unimportant (passive).

Make further examples using these prompts:

1. They/ask/wear/small computers
2. Other monitoring devices/develop/US
3. The equipment/use/increase/efficient delivery of goods
4. The need for paper/reduce
5. Satellite technology/develop/monitor productivity
6. Workers/ask/wear/computers/on their wrists

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7 Discussion

1. Do you think it is an infringement of privacy to ask people to wear tags that can identify where they are and what they are doing?
2. Would you be willing to wear one at work?

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