

RIGHT or WRONG? Monitoring e-mail

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A friend of mine recently was terminated from his job. In the exit interview, he was accused of misusing company e-mail by the way he identified some of his co-workers and supervisor. Isn't this an issue of improper surveillance of an employee?

Your friend has learned a valuable lesson. Comments sent to or from company e-mail are not private. While it would help if employers made their e-mail policy clear, they are not required to do so. The company has a right if not a duty to monitor what is sent out by its employees.

Unfortunately, your friend has been reminded of lessons that come from "Everything I needed to know I learned in kindergarten" and, in this case, "... in Sunday school." Kindergarten and Sunday school teachers told us, "If you can't say anything nice about someone, say nothing at all" and treat others as you wish to be treated. If a negative comment was made concerning another employee, it never should be done by e-mail, where it permanently becomes a part of the computer record and potentially disseminated by anyone inside or outside the organization. If one feels compelled to make negative comments about another employee, those comments should be made in person or private written communication only to individuals in the organization who need to know. Unless the fellow employee is negatively impacting one's work, the company's integrity or bottom line, there is no reason to make negative comments.

In the workplace, improper use of e-mail can leave the employer open to great costs and liability, such as accidentally entering into contracts, breach of copyright laws, libel actions, and exposure to sexual harassment

and bullying claims. Your company may be held liable for your actions and comments, even if made without the company's consent.

A recent article in KY3.com stated that in spite of the fact nearly half of office workers are informed that their at-work technology usage is monitored, a majority still use that technology for personal reasons. The article reported seven of 10 office workers access the Internet at work for nonwork purposes. More than half send and receive personal messages through work e-mail. Stealing productivity from employers is no different than pilfering office supplies.

Computers have created an aura of anonymity we all take for granted on too casual a basis. Comments are made in e-mails that never would be made to the other party's face or even in a postage-mailed letter. Whether at home or at work, you never should e-mail anything you would not want read by the world. When we feel a need to complain about fellow employees, supervisors, family or friends, those complaints should only be aired in private, to a trusted source, and never put in writing. Your friend has learned words hurt both the speaker and the subject and can never be taken back.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

