Microsoft's new "Productivity Score" helps employers spy on workers

Mike Ingram
29 November 2020

Microsoft has expanded the analytics provided with its Office 365 suite of productivity applications into a "full-fledged workplace surveillance tool" according to privacy advocates.

The tool, called Productivity Score, allows employers to know the number of days a person was active on Microsoft Word, Outlook, Excel, PowerPoint, Skype and Teams over the previous four weeks and on what type of device.

The software gives managers access to 73 pieces of granular data about employee behaviors, all of which is associated with employees by name. Microsoft denies the software is workplace surveillance, but privacy advocates say it most certainly is.

Vienna-based researcher Wolfie Christl tweeted a screenshot of the Productivity Score dashboard, writing that "Esoteric metrics based on analyzing extensive data about employee activities has been mostly the domain of fringe software vendors. Now it's built into MS 365."

"A new feature to calculate 'productivity scores' turns Microsoft 365 into a full-fledged workplace surveillance tool," Christl added.

Microsoft claims that the software is not designed as a tool to monitor employee work output activities. A September blog post by Anthony Smith, introducing the product, claimed, "we safeguard against this type of use by not providing specific information on individualized actions, and instead only analyze user-level data aggregated over a 28-day period, so you can't see what a specific employee is working on at a given time. Productivity Score was built to help you understand how people are using the productivity tools and how well the underlying technology supports them in this."

In an email to *The Register* Christl refuted the software giant's claim, saying the system "does clearly monitor employee activities." He referenced Microsoft's own promotional video which shows a list of clearly identifiable users. Posting the video on Twitter, Christl wrote: "Employers/managers can analyze employee activities at the individual level (!), for example, the number of days an employee has been sending emails, using the chat, using 'mentions' in emails etc."

While Productivity Score is not enabled by default, when companies enable it, the software automatically shows data on individual employees. Employers can anonymize user data or opt out of using user-level data at all, but managers have to manually change the settings. Employees have no control over this whatsoever.

The software dashboard provides a so-called peer benchmark, which measures the company against other companies for each metric collected, meaning companies using the product are sending analytics data back to Microsoft.

The documentation for Productivity Score shows the extent of workplace surveillance the software allows. "Person metrics" include data such as the number of hours a person spent in meetings and on email outside of working hours and the number of emails sent. The system also monitors "low-quality meeting hours" which is defined as, the "Number of meeting hours in which an attendee multitasked, attended a conflicting meeting, or attended a meeting that exhibits Redundancy (organizational)."

Employees are assigned an "influence" score "that indicates how well connected a person is within the company. A higher score means that the person is better connected and has greater potential to drive change." The product documentation states. The software also

has a "Diverse tie score" indicating how varied and broad a person's connections are and a "Strong tie score" recording how many "strong and tight engagements a person has had."

J.S. Nelson is an associate professor of law at Villanova University who studies workplace surveillance. She told *Forbes* the software is "horrendous." "Why are they monitoring people this way and what is that telling people about the relationship they should have with their employers in the workplace? What message are you sending?" she asked.

More invasive employee monitoring tools such as Teramind can capture any user activity, including screen recordings, live views of employee computers, and track emails, keystrokes and even video sessions. These are specialized products and regarded as overly intrusive by many workers.

A *Computerworld* article from October this year examined how COVID-19 and the move to remote working has spurred faster adoption of employee monitoring software by companies seeking to boost productivity and spy on workers outside of the office.

The article quotes Brian Kropp, group vice president of Gartner's HR practice. "When COVID-19 hit, we found that within the first month, 16 percent of companies put new tracking software on the laptops of remote employees," Kropp said. By July that number had risen to 26 percent of companies.

Kropp said that even before the pandemic, companies were moving in the direction of "passively monitoring our employees, listening to them and watching them, and asking them less and less."

"What the pandemic has done is just accelerate the speed at which that is happening. ... They were going to get there eventually; the pandemic has just accelerated the future into the present," Kropp said.

The development of Productivity Score now gives companies similar tools without the need to roll out new software. The near-ubiquitous presence of Office 365 in the workplace gives employers ready-made surveillance of their employees.

While the office suite market is dominated by Google with 59.41 percent, Microsoft Office 365 is used by over a million companies worldwide with close to 600,000 companies in the US alone. Under conditions of a global pandemic that has forced the closure of offices around the world and enforced remote working from home, Microsoft is giving corporations the tools to drive up productivity and monitor workers' activity 24 hours a day.

The metrics provided by Productivity Score will be used by corporations to identify low scoring employees and facilitate more layoffs with increased exploitation of those remaining, under an ever-present pressure to improve their scores.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact