WEARABLES

Is Your Office in Need of Guidelines for Wearables?

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People in several countries seem to be warming up to wearable technology at work. An October survey by Kronos of 9,126 adults in eight countries, including the United States, found that 73 percent of the respondents saw at least one benefit to using wearable technology in the workplace.

"The legal issues of technology are and probably will always be in flux," Chicago-based human-resources attorney and counselor Charles Krugel tells me via email. "Because the technology changes so rapidly, employers and employees should educate themselves on these advancements. Moreover, they need to understand how these advancements relate to their overall human resources strategy."

As wearable technology continues to evolve, employers will need to establish guidelines and keep them updated. Here are five things to keep in mind:

1. Protect employees' privacy.

Gonzalo Tudela, CEO of a Vancouver-based tech firm Vandrico that offers enterprise wearables, says the evolution of these products will force companies to focus more on employee privacy.

"Wearables present an opportunity to track intimate information about a worker's health and activity," Tudela shares with me via email. In real time, "organizations can track their location, whether they are walking, standing or sitting, and even their heart rate," he explains.

Such intimate details about workers' vital signs and activity "will pose whole new security questions for enterprises," he says. "Having this sensitive information go through cloud services could be too risky for many industries."

When creating a wearables policy, consider the type of data to be recorded and its use. For example, if for a company's employee-wellness program, health information is being tracked, keep this information confidential between the employee and his or her health-care provider, Tudela suggests.

2. Adapt the electronic communications policy.

Many companies already have a digital-communications policy for Internet usage, company email and project-management tools. Instead of developing a separate policy for wearables, integrate the new rules into the current policy.

"The landscape of e-communications and the 'Internet of things' changes so rapidly that to focus on one specific form of communication, or a specific device, may render a policy obsolete in a matter of months," Krugel says.

Krugel advises integration of a wearables policy into a company's existing policies on privacy, confidentiality, competition or solicitation. If an employee uses wearable technology to record a confidential conversation at a meeting, this could violate the company's confidentiality policy, necessitating action.

3. Give an option in health-care plans.

In addition to incentivizing employees to maintain a healthful lifestyle through use of wearable technology, offer an option for such devices in their health-care benefits. PwC's "Health Wearables: Early Days" report released in October shows that 68 percent of 1,000 consumers surveyed said they would wear employer-provided wearables in exchange for a break on their insurance premiums.

Engage PEO CEO Jay Starkman, whose national legal and HR consultancy is based in St. Petersburg, Fla., tells me he believes employers should hold their employees accountable for their health choices.

"The number one goal of a wellness program is to promote health and prevent disease," writes Starkman, who recommends defining corporate wellness programs in writing and making them structured and reasonable.

Starkman also says that if employees want to be rewarded for participating in their employer's wellness program, it should be their personal decision whether to directly provide data such as calorie intake and number of steps taken to their employer.

4. Offer only productivity-boosting devices.

PwC research showed that 77 percent of those surveyed in its "Wearable Future Report," also published in October, said wearable technology will make them more efficient and productive at work.

"Connecting a variety of worker [wearable] devices to your IT systems in an intelligent way will drive exponential productivity gains," Tudela says. "It is the ultimate opportunity to utilize the 'big data' in real time that operational industries have been collecting for years."

Not doing so could mean losing a competitive advantage, he says.

The best way to make wearables productive for a company is to seamlessly integrate them with other technology. PwC's research showed that 41 percent of workers believe

wearable-technology integration should be a top priority in their workplace adoption.

"Each device comes with its own capabilities, unique interface and distinctly different use cases," Tudela says. "Organizations will need smart software tools to help them organize their devices and utilize them in real time to get the most value."

5. Create guidelines for employee devices.

If companies go for wearable technology, they'll need to address the "bring your own device" issue. Determine if wearables will be provided for employees or staffers will bring in their own. PwC's "Wearable Future Report" showed 46 percent of those surveyed said their employer should fund wearable technology, instead of requiring them to provide their own devices.

"Employers are also wrestling with the issue of whether they can [bar] employees from certain electronic activities if the employee is using their own device," Krugel says. "This relates to who owns or can mandate how to use bandwidth, ISPs, servers, messaging systems, voice systems."

So companies need to be aware of "who can store, access or retrieve information" and recognize that issues may arise from how it's stored or accessed, Krugel says.

Does your company have wearable technology guidelines? What are the essential elements?

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