The Internet of Things and our sleep: corporate visibility taken too far?

By João on September 5, 2016 at 9:00 pm
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Our last post, on how the Internet of Things is revolutionising the insurance industry, had an overall positive overview on the benefits of this evolution – although concluding with a less enthusiastic remark on how data gathering through everyday objects (even smart toothbrushes!) increasingly destroys privacy, “even in the most private place of the house…”.

Shortly after writing it, I came across another example regarding visibility into another strong candidate to the “most private place of the house”: the bedroom.

Sleep monitoring devices have long existed, but the Internet of Things has expanded their possible usages. Going beyond the “traditional” usage by doctors dealing with disturbances of their individual patients, and even going beyond usage by self-monitoring by individuals, now there are calls for “companies to know how employees are sleeping”. The argument is that “If employers want to improve their employees’ health, thereby their productivity, they need to focus not just on sleep quantity but also sleep quality. (…) to manage chronic sleep problems that plague employees”, because it has “real economic impact”.

“Activity trackers are at the centre of the quantified-self movement and have become mass consumer devices. The data these devices provide, give companies (especially corporate wellness managers) access and exclusive insights into the health of departments, floors, and the overall institution”.

OK, no doubt that “The quantified-self sleep data is a trove of useful information”. And the ‘managerialist argument’ that “If companies know how employees are sleeping, they can make considerable changes with their approach to projects to assure that employees not only get enough zzz’s but quality sleep” is appealing – at least, in a ‘Machiavellian’ way, in which the ends justify the means.

But, in my strictly personal perspective, if we accept the idea that certain lines should not be crossed, then this is probably a good case. Giving access to certain ‘wellness’ employees information about how their colleagues sleep, presumably from an aggregate level to the granular level enabled by the Big Data approach leveraging on the IoT, suggests an (actual) visibility well beyond what previous architects of managerial domination have dreamed of. The corporate-level Big Brother, paternalistic approach towards employees’ well being when seeking productivity gains and economic impact is, in my strictly personal view, an area where Mankind should self-refrain from entering.

This, of course, has little to do with management accounting – unless we consider ‘counting the hours’ and evaluating the ‘quality of sleep’ of employees another promising management accounting area! But after last week’s post, I felt that a less enthusiastic view on IoT applications was needed in this blog! It rephrases the well-known quote “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts” to “not everything that counts and can be counted should actually be counted”.

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