

10 Things Your Boss Won't Tell You

1. "Yes, we are reading your emails... and your IMs."

Like many financial services firms, Wedbush Securities monitors the daily emails, instant messages and social networking activity of its 1,000-plus employees, says Mattias Torny, the company's Director of IT. They use an email monitoring software to flag certain types of messages and keywords within messages, he says. Every day, they end up reading 5% to 10% of the messages employees send.

That's fairly extensive, but many firms are, at the very least, monitoring some of employees' Internet, phone and email use, especially larger companies and those in sensitive or heavily regulated industries. The market for email monitoring software has grown more than 25% each year since 2008 and is projected to reach \$1.23 billion in 2013, according to IT market research firm Gartner; more than one in three large U.S. companies employ actual people to read or analyze employee email, according to a 2010 study by email monitoring firm Proofpoint. Plus, a survey by the American Management Association and The ePolicy Institute found that almost half of the small, medium and large companies surveyed monitored phone use, and two out of three monitored web use. Instant-message and text-message monitoring are also increasing, says Stephen Marsh, chief executive of email archiving firm Smarsh.

Not only do employers watch what you're doing, but many act on what they find. One in five large U.S. companies fired an employee for violating email policies in the past year, the Proofpoint survey found. What was a fireable offense? Most email investigations pertain to issues of employees leaking sensitive, confidential or embarrassing information, or theft – not racy messages sent to a girlfriend from an office email account or the occasional online shopping binge from the corporate desktop.

2. "You're too old for this."

When Joyce Kalivas-Griffin, 57, saw a job opening at a private school nearby, she immediately sent in her resume. She was hopeful – the description matched her skills almost perfectly – but heard nothing. Then, she noticed that the job had been posted again, so she tweaked her resume to obscure her age and resubmitted it. This time, the school called her in for an interview. Kalivas-Griffin says she nailed it, but she didn't get the job: She believes that when the interviewer met her and realized she's no 30-something, her age tipped the scales against her.

Kalivas-Griffin will never know for sure, but as the workforce gets grayer, age bias is likely to increase, experts say. Roughly 25% of employers said they were reluctant to hire older workers, according to a 2006 survey by the Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, and after looking at only a resume, employers discriminated against women they perceived to be 50 or older, according to a 2007 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research. It's a trend, experts say, that's gotten worse in the recession, as evidenced by the latest data from the Labor Department: laid-off workers 55 and older spent an average of 35 weeks looking for work, compared with 30 weeks for 25 to 54 year-olds. "We know it's very prevalent," says Laurie McCann, a senior attorney with AARP Foundation Litigation. "The problem is that people often don't know it's happening, because of the nature of applying for jobs." In a world of online applications, you never see the other candidates, nor do you meet the hiring manager. That's why career consultants often recommend anyone older than 45 or 50 alter their resume to shift focus away from their age and toward their experience, achievements and skills. You don't need to list every job you've ever had; instead highlight achievements in a measurable way – like say, how much you increased revenue for your department – and be sure to list tech, social media and other skills.

3. "I know when you're faking the flu."

As a production manager at a high-end commercial photo lab, Stuart Horvath, 32, supervised both permanent and freelance production assistants. Their job was to process the film, but when someone "didn't feel like dealing with all the slides that day, the machine would 'suddenly' jam," Horvath says – and he knew it didn't jam nearly as frequently as a few of his staff members claimed. Then there were the myriad sick days taken by one of his freelancers. Horvath suspected he was faking – and confirmed it when he ran into the employee at a bar on a night when he'd claimed to be sick. Look, he says: "I've been a boss, but I've been an employee too."

It's true: The boss often knows if you're slacking off, job-hunting, sneaking out, faking sick or padding your expense report. In fact, a growing number of companies are hiring *private investigators* to track employees who call in sick with a suspicious illness, according to an article published last month in Bloomberg Businessweek. Perhaps it's a sign of tough times. More than one in four employers say they think more employees have been faking illness and taking the day off since the economic downturn began, a 2009 CareerBuilder.com survey revealed. They're not merely paranoid: About one-third of workers admit to calling in sick to work when they weren't. And that's not all your boss knows. "Sometimes the people on my team spend their days putting up a smokescreen to make it look like they are working hard, but I know they can't be," one employer at a financial services firm in Phoenix says. Another knew her employee was looking for another job. The lesson: Your antics are, for the moment, tolerated, but they probably haven't gone unnoticed.

4. "Your kid? Your problem."

By now it's common knowledge that women earn less than men – about 81 cents for every dollar. Having a kid hurts women's

earning potential even further. The so-called "mommy penalty" may manifest in many ways: A mother may get passed over for a promotion because the boss thinks she takes off too much time to care for her kids or that she's more concerned about the family than her career. A mom may get overlooked for high-profile projects because the boss fears she won't devote enough time and energy

Those are hard slights to quantify. Not so for the penalty faced by women who take time off to raise a child – even for a period as short as 18 months. Women with M.B.A.s who left the workforce for a year and a half to raise children make 41% less than men with the same degree; female Ph.D.'s make a third less; lawyers, 29% less, and doctors, 16%, according to a 2010 study by Harvard economics professors Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz. "Business occupations place heavy penalties on employees who deviate from the norm," Goldin and Katz write in the study.

5. "I'm your best friend..."

For the six out of 10 workers who say they've considered a boss a friend, this won't come as a surprise: Being the boss's pal, or pet, comes with perks. Some bosses play favorites in obvious ways, like giving a particular subordinate the plum assignments or pushing upper management for his raise. Others are more subtle, seeming to treat all employees equally. But then they'll offer more guidance to a favored worker, or make sure she is introduced to the "right" people, says career and executive coach Roy Cohen. And as long as the relationship works, everyone can benefit: Good relationships tend to lead to higher worker engagement; compatibility can help a worker get a raise or a promotion; everyone likes to work with people they like and trust.

But the footing is never strictly equal when one friend can fire the other. "You have to be very careful," says Cohen. The boss is still evaluating your compensation and performance, and the minute there's a problem or a disagreement over either, feelings get hurt. To keep a relationship friendly, without crossing the line into friends territory, avoid talking about sensitive personal issues, he suggests: No matter how close you might feel, ultimately there is always the chance that your boss will use that information in a way that serves his purposes, not yours.

6. "...And your worst enemy."

But sometimes, the boss is your worst enemy. Just as a good relationship with your boss can bolster your career, a lousy one can tank it. Or worse. One study found that, in incidences of "workplace bullying" -- "repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate or get a reaction from another," according to the Society for Human Resource Management – the boss is the bully 72% of the time. Nearly half of people who were bullied at work suffered stress-related health problems, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute. Even if your relationship doesn't deteriorate to that level, your communication can be strained if your boss doesn't keep his word, gives you the silent treatment, invades your privacy or deflects blame from himself -- all of which lead workers to experience "more exhaustion, job tension, nervousness, depressed mood and mistrust," a Florida State University study found. Worst case, this kind of behavior from the boss can even kill you: A 2008 study published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine found that employees who had worked for four years under a boss who was uncommunicative, inconsiderate or opaque were 60% more likely to have a heart attack.

7. "I don't promote based on performance."

Usually, workers have to do a good job to get promoted. But in many cases, that's not enough. Who rises (and who doesn't) is a mix of factors, most of which workers have no real control over, including supervisors' preferences, organizational rules and company culture. In some organizations, particularly larger, more traditional companies, seniority may be the main factor in promotion decisions, says Tony Deblauwe, founder of HR consulting firm HR4Change. Seniority-based promotions are more common in the U.S. than in other countries, according to a 2004 study in the Socio-Economic Review, and "more popular than economic explanations would allow." Compatibility with the boss is critical, too, Deblauwe says: "Who you know makes a big difference, particularly the higher up you go."

The reverse is also true: Being smart and capable doesn't even guarantee your job. One manager in a small Arizona investment planning firm, who declined to give his name to preserve company morale, fired a subordinate whom he says was "very smart," with good credentials and a degree from a prestigious university. But the manager also found him difficult and hard to supervise, and ultimately fired him: "His strained relationship with me was a big factor in this decision."

8. "I'm shallow."

As if being thin and attractive weren't its own reward, being both helps workers get ahead at work, too. The opposite is also true: People who are unattractive or overweight in their bosses' eyes are punished for it at the office. In spite of the fact that in most professions, attractiveness has no bearing on performance, many bosses subscribe to the notion that "what is beautiful is good" (*PBF*, according to a psychology researcher from Hofstra. As a result, good-looking people earn 3% to 8% more than average-looking people, who, in turn, earn 5% to 10% more than those rated "plain," according to a 2005 study by Daniel Hamermesh of the University of Texas and Jeff Biddle of Michigan State University.

Extra body weight comes with its own employment challenges: 43% of overweight people say they were teased, harassed, fired, not hired, passed over for a promotion or otherwise treated unfairly because of their weight by an employer or supervisor. And overweight people are paid as much as 6% less than their slimmer co-workers in comparable positions, according to Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity (*PDF* ³). The standards are tougher for women than men: Women with a body mass index of 27 or higher are at "serious risk" of weight discrimination, while men must have a BMI of at least 35 to be at comparable risk, a 2008 Yale University study found. And moderately obese women are three times more likely than moderately obese men to be the victims of weight discrimination, the study also found.

9. "I don't have time for you."

Forty-year-old Erika Worth owns a background-check business in Vancouver, Wash., and a detective agency in Los Angeles, putting her in a dual role that requires monthly trips up and down the West Coast. So every time one of her 15 employees has a question about a project or a scheduling conflict, Worth asks them to try to come up with a solution on their own. It's not that she doesn't care: She just doesn't have time to handle every problem as it arises.

Bosses have always been busy, but since the cutbacks of the recession, many managers now have even less time to supervise, talk to, or nurture their staffs, Cohen says. Two-thirds of employees say they have too little interaction with their boss, up from just over half in 2008, according to a study by Leadership IQ. "When times get tough, managers become avoidant," writes Mark Murphy, who worked on the study. And with unemployment so high, some bosses feel they don't need to spend as much time with their employees: If the employee doesn't like it, well, there are plenty of other people who would like their job. "A lot of bosses have this 'but-I-give-them-a-paycheck' mentality," says career coach Sherri Thomas. "They think that the paycheck is enough of a thank you

10. "It's all about me."

You've slaved away on a project for weeks, only to hear the boss give the presentation with no mention of your name. You've spent months doing research for that marketing proposal, but when it goes to boss's boss, there's no mention of your contribution. Bosses who take credit for your work or blame you for problems that you didn't fully cause can "be equally – and sometimes more – damaging to employees" than the obvious bully, says Deblauwe.

Nearly half of workers say their boss has taken credit for their work, and more than a third say their boss has "thrown them under the bus" to save himself, according to a study by Spherion Staffing. That kind of credit-grabbing and blame-deflecting behavior is growing more common, says Thomas. In a tight labor market, "there's so much pressure to achieve and people feel like they have to be overachievers."

To be fair, this behavior isn't always as bad as it seems. Sometimes it's not appropriate to credit each employee, such as when the higher-ups don't care which member of the boss's team did what and simply want to know the results, says career coach Hallie Crawford. And "some bosses think of the employee as there to help them and that's just part of the deal," Crawford says. They may not be maliciously avoiding giving you credit, rather they may see the employer/employee relationship as not requiring it, she says. And for bosses with large teams, "it might be human error" -- they just can't remember who did what part of the project.

¹http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/10_50/b4207093635068.htm

²http://www.hofstra.edu/pdf/orsp_shahani-denning_spring03.pdf

³<http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/bias/WeightBiasPolicyRuddReport.pdf>

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