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How Employees Respond to Digital Monitoring and Datafied Control

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Abstract

Digital monitoring increasingly converts work activity into observable, comparable, and actionable data. Yet employees do not respond uniformly to such control, and prevailing accounts often isolate acceptance, privacy concern, workarounds, voice, or resistance rather than explaining their relationship. This Original Typology Article develops a proposed Employee-Response Typology for organizing employee agency under digital monitoring and datafied control. Drawing on organizational behavior, work design, workplace privacy, algorithmic management, labor-process, and employment-relations scholarship, the article distinguishes four ideal-typical responses: compliance, concealment, negotiation, and collective resistance. The typology classifies responses by their visibility to organizational authorities, locus of agency, orientation toward the monitoring regime, rule engagement, and temporal stability. It further proposes that employee responses may coexist or change as perceived legitimacy, evaluative opacity, economic dependence, appeal efficacy, managerial reaction, and collective capacity shift. Compliance is separated from consent and performance; concealment from misconduct; negotiation from merely formal voice; and collective resistance from aggregated dissatisfaction. The framework implies that monitoring design should be evaluated not only by data accuracy or observable conformity but also by the response patterns it elicits and the authority relations it institutionalizes. The contribution remains conceptual: the categories are not validated employee classes, the transition paths are not causal estimates, and evidence from platform work cannot be transferred automatically to conventional employment. Longitudinal, multilevel, comparative, and field-experimental research is required to test, revise, combine, or reject the proposed categories and relationships.

Keywords: Employee agency under digital monitoring, Foundations and classification dimensions, Compliance responses, Concealment responses, Transitions between response types, Employee-response typology

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Introduction

Employee agency under digital monitoring

Digital monitoring now reaches beyond direct observation. Organizations can record activity, communication, location, pace, customer evaluations, workflow adherence, and behavioral traces, then convert those records into scores, alerts, rankings, or managerial interventions. Algorithmic systems may also recommend tasks, prioritize cases, allocate opportunities, or trigger discipline. These capacities do not eliminate employee agency. They relocate it into a contested environment in which workers interpret what is visible, infer how data are used, and decide whether to accommodate, evade, question, or oppose the control arrangement. Research on algorithmic control, electronic performance monitoring, and workplace privacy therefore shows that monitoring is simultaneously technical, managerial, and relational [1-3].

The organizational problem is not simply whether employees “accept” surveillance. Acceptance is often measured as an attitude, whereas organizational control operates through enacted behavior. Employees may dislike monitoring yet comply



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because their income or evaluation depends on it. They may endorse safety-oriented data collection but reject secondary use for performance ranking. They may appear compliant while moving important activity outside the monitored channel. Contemporary evidence indicates that employee attitudes vary with monitoring purpose, the type of information collected, and perceived justification [4]. Such variation matters, but it does not by itself explain what employees do, whether their actions are visible, or how individual tactics become negotiated or collective responses.

Existing research provides valuable but fragmented response vocabularies. Electronic monitoring studies emphasize performance, stress, fairness, and reactance. Privacy scholarship examines informational boundaries and legitimacy. Algorithmic-management research documents experimentation, gaming, dependence, and power asymmetry. Labor-process and employment-relations studies analyze consent, solidarity, and resistance. Treating these findings as unrelated outcomes obscures a central theoretical question: how can distinct employee responses be compared without reducing them to a positive-versus-negative attitude or a compliance-versus-resistance binary?

This article develops an original, non-empirical typology that organizes employee responses into compliance, concealment, negotiation, and collective resistance. These are proposed ideal types, not stable personalities or exhaustive behavioral classes. The framework distinguishes responses by visibility, locus of agency, orientation toward the monitoring regime, engagement with formal rules, and temporal stability. It also proposes conditional movement among types as legitimacy, opacity, dependence, voice efficacy, managerial response, and collective capacity change. The objective is analytical clarification: to connect established findings while keeping descriptive evidence separate from causal inference, individual experience separate from organizational-level conclusions, and conceptual plausibility separate from empirical validation.

Foundations and classification dimensions

The object to which employees respond must first be specified. Algorithmic management combines data collection with coordination, evaluation, direction, or discipline, but its practical meaning depends on how the system is embedded in work [5]. Algorithms may redesign autonomy, task variety, feedback, pacing, skill use, and responsibility rather than merely observing an unchanged job [6]. Workplace-surveillance research likewise indicates that consequences vary with purpose, technology, transparency, invasiveness, occupation, organizational culture, and implementation [7]. Monitoring should therefore be treated as a sociotechnical control configuration, not as a single intervention with uniform effects.

The proposed typology uses five classification dimensions. First, response visibility concerns whether action is overt, partially visible, or concealed from monitoring authorities. Second, locus distinguishes individual action from relational adjustment and coordinated collective action. Third, orientation identifies whether employees primarily accommodate, circumvent, modify, or challenge the regime. Fourth, rule engagement separates formal adherence, strategic compliance, reinterpretation, and direct contestation. Fifth, temporal stability distinguishes a provisional episode from a routinized response or transition. These dimensions synthesize established distinctions but are themselves proposed. They are not assumed to be independent measurement factors, and they do not predict one response from one monitoring feature. The same employee may comply with safety monitoring, conceal activity from productivity analytics, negotiate an unfair score, and support collective opposition to secondary data use. Alternative explanations must also remain visible: low trust, insecure employment, poor job design, workload, leadership behavior, or pre-existing conflict may shape responses independently of the technology. Individual conduct cannot be aggregated automatically to team culture or organizational consequences.

Compliance responses

Compliance refers to observable alignment with monitored expectations. It includes following a specified process, adjusting conduct to recorded indicators, meeting measured targets, or anticipating what an evaluative system is likely to reward. Compliance is analytically important because monitoring often makes selected behaviors more visible and sanctionable. In a bounded healthcare context, individual electronic monitoring increased adherence to a defined hand-hygiene process [8]. This evidence demonstrates that monitoring can influence a specific observable behavior; it does not establish generalized productivity, commitment, learning, or well-being effects.

Compliance should not be equated with consent. Employees may comply because monitoring appears legitimate, because a rule supports safety, because incentives are attractive, or because refusal threatens income or continued access to work. The same outward conduct can therefore arise from endorsement, strategic adaptation, fear, habit, or constrained choice. Surveillance can also produce psychological reactance when employees experience it as restricting freedom [9]. Reactance does not necessarily become visible resistance, but it makes apparent conformity an unreliable indicator of acceptance.

A second distinction separates compliance with a measure from performance of the underlying work. When recorded indicators become targets, employees may prioritize what can be seen while neglecting less measurable activities. Meta-analytic evidence does not establish a dependable general improvement in work performance from electronic performance monitoring [10]. That conclusion should not be reversed into a claim that monitoring never helps. Rather, it shows why visible adherence must be evaluated against task quality, unmeasured contributions, adaptation costs, and the purpose of the monitoring arrangement.

The proposed typology therefore treats compliance as a response domain with several possible forms: substantive compliance, instrumental compliance, anticipatory compliance, selective compliance, and coerced compliance. These forms require empirical differentiation. A monitored employee may follow one rule while questioning data retention, helping colleagues evade another metric, or later joining a collective challenge. Compliance is thus neither the absence of agency nor the endpoint of a fixed sequence. Its meaning is conditional on the rule, the employee's alternatives, the legitimacy of authority, and the consequences attached to visibility.

Concealment responses

Concealment refers to actions that reduce, redirect, curate, or strategically manage what monitoring authorities can observe. It can include making activity less visible, shifting coordination to unmonitored channels, selectively disclosing information, preserving parallel records, manipulating the timing of visible work, or presenting indicators that satisfy a metric without fully representing underlying practice. Concealment is not synonymous with deception or misconduct. Employees may conceal activity to protect privacy, professional judgment, safety, identity, relational work, or forms of contribution that the monitoring system cannot represent.

Organizational evidence shows that coercive surveillance can produce worker invisibility practices and that managers may interpret reduced visibility as justification for expanding control [11]. This recursive pattern is important because concealment is not merely an individual reaction; it may alter managerial beliefs and the monitoring regime itself. Yet the cycle is conditional. Some invisibility practices arise from practical task demands, and some organizations respond by improving trust or redesigning the system rather than increasing surveillance.

Opacity creates a related form of concealment. When evaluation criteria are hidden, workers may experiment with observable behavior to infer how the system classifies them [12]. Such experimentation can produce provisional rule-following, strategic curation, or movement outside monitored channels. Organizational analytics can also encourage employees to signal what indicators reward, weakening the connection between a metric and the work it is intended to represent [13]. Strategic signaling should not automatically be labeled gaming: actors may be clarifying priorities, translating complex work, or adapting to ambiguous expectations.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for how employees respond to digital monitoring and datafied control.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for How Employees Respond to Digital Monitoring and Datafied Control.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Digital monitoring	Technological observation, recording, or analysis of work-related activity.	Clarifies the object of response.	Broader than direct supervision; narrower than all digital work.	Foundational control condition.	Actual data use may differ from formal policy.	Monitoring capability does not establish legitimate authority.
Datafied control	Use of data, metrics, or classifications to direct, evaluate, rank, or discipline work.	Connects visibility with managerial action.	More consequential than data collection alone.	Target of accommodation or contestation.	Human mediation may alter system effects.	Data do not represent performance automatically.
Employee agency	Situated capacity to interpret and act within constraints.	Avoids technological determinism.	Not equivalent to autonomy or equal power.	Enables all response types.	Opportunity and resources vary.	Agency may coexist with dependence.
Compliance	Observable alignment with monitored expectations.	Separates conformity from endorsement.	Differs from consent and commitment.	Proposed accommodative type.	Motives are often unobserved.	Visible adherence is not proof of effectiveness.
Concealment	Reduction, curation, or redirection of managerial visibility.	Captures hidden agency.	Differs from ordinary privacy and overt voice.	Proposed circumvention type.	Protective and harmful forms may overlap.	Concealment is not inherently misconduct.
Negotiation	Overt effort to reinterpret or modify monitoring.	Identifies a response between compliance and opposition.	Differs from formal permission without influence.	Proposed modification type.	Consequential influence may be absent.	Voice opportunity is not decision power.
Collective resistance	Coordinated challenge to monitoring or associated authority.	Distinguishes shared action from private dissatisfaction.	Differs from aggregated individual reactance.	Proposed challenge type.	Coordination and durability vary.	Common grievance alone is insufficient.

Transition	Conditional movement or coexistence among response types.	Prevents static worker classification.	Differs from a universal stage model.	Proposed temporal mechanism.	Direction and timing require testing.	No transition probability is established.
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The table’s categories are deliberately bounded. Concealment may coexist with compliance when an employee satisfies a visible requirement while protecting unmeasured activity. It may shift toward negotiation when credible appeal becomes available, or toward collective resistance when hidden tactics become shared and coordinated. These relationships are proposed rather than validated. Their interpretation must remain sensitive to employment status, occupational norms, data sensitivity, managerial discretion, national institutions, and the possibility that apparently concealed conduct reflects ordinary adaptation to poorly designed work rather than opposition to monitoring.

Negotiation responses

Negotiation refers to overt efforts to reinterpret, modify, limit, or repair a monitoring arrangement without necessarily rejecting it. Employees may request explanations, dispute classifications, seek exceptions, bargain over data use, or participate in redesign. This category is distinct from concealment because the attempt to influence the arrangement is visible to another organizational actor. It is also distinct from compliance because employees question how a rule is applied, what information is legitimate, or who should possess decision authority. Research on online work shows that workers retain situated agency under algorithmic power asymmetry through interpretation, tactical action, and contestation [14]. That agency remains constrained by dependence, information gaps, and limited alternatives.

Negotiation is not confined to formal appeals. Data systems acquire practical meaning through local enactment by managers and employees, so organizational control may differ from the system’s nominal capability [15]. Employees can explain anomalies, protect unmeasured work, persuade supervisors to disregard misleading indicators, or establish informal accommodations. These actions may alter day-to-day practice without changing formal policy. Consequently, evidence of local adjustment cannot establish that employees possess durable influence over system design or data governance.

Collaborative repair provides a more relational form of negotiation. When algorithmically mediated coordination breaks down, managers and workers may jointly restore workable arrangements, while the resulting repair can preserve rather than dismantle managerial control [16]. Negotiation should therefore not be romanticized as empowerment. The proposed category includes explanation, appeal, informal bargaining, local reinterpretation, and participatory redesign, but the consequences of these practices depend on whether employee input can change decisions, rules, or future system behavior. A voice channel without consequential influence may absorb dissatisfaction while leaving authority unchanged.

A further boundary concerns the object being negotiated. Employees may contest a score, a data source, a retention period, a managerial interpretation, or the organization’s authority to monitor at all. These targets differ in scope and may produce different outcomes. Correction of one inaccurate score does not demonstrate influence over the system that generated it. The proposed category therefore records both the visibility of employee action and the level at which modification is sought.

Collective resistance responses

Collective resistance refers to coordinated action that challenges monitoring practices, their consequences, or the authority relations they sustain. Its defining feature is not the intensity of dissatisfaction but the presence of shared interpretation, coordination, and a collective target. Employees may exchange information about scoring systems, coordinate workarounds, refuse data collection, mobilize through unions, pursue legal challenges, create counter-data, or make monitoring controversies public. Comparative evidence from platform-based delivery work shows that shared conditions can support solidarity, while institutional context, communication, and organizing resources shape whether solidarity becomes mobilization [17].

Collective resistance may grow from concealed practices without becoming fully visible at once. Research among African gig workers documents repertoires that combine hidden transcripts, shared tactics, and overt contestation under structurally constrained labor-market conditions [18]. This evidence supports a distinction between isolated concealment and coordinated resistance, but it does not imply that covert practices inevitably develop into collective action. Workers may remain fragmented by employment status, competition, geography, sanctions, or unequal access to communication networks.

Collective resistance can also make algorithmic control an explicit object of organization and activism. Evidence concerning ride-hailing drivers shows that workers may move beyond private coping to challenge platform rules and labor arrangements collectively [19]. Transferability remains bounded because existing occupational communities, regulatory conditions, and market structures may enable mobilization independently of datafication. The proposed typology therefore treats collective capacity as a contextual condition rather than a property automatically produced by monitoring. Similar grievances do not constitute collective resistance unless employees establish coordination, recognize a shared target, and undertake action in relation to it. Collective action may seek abolition of monitoring, narrower data use, procedural influence, or redistribution of decision authority; these goals should not be collapsed into one oppositional outcome.

The target of collective resistance also matters. Coordinated action may oppose a particular metric while accepting monitoring for safety, or it may challenge the employment model that gives the system authority. Actions directed at a local supervisor, a platform, an employer, or a regulator operate at different levels. The proposed category should therefore record the collective target and the institutional route used rather than treating every coordinated response as equivalent.

transitions between response types

Employee responses are episodes that may coexist, stabilize, or change rather than fixed attributes of workers. Compliance can be anticipatory when employees face opaque expectations and adapt provisionally while continuing to infer what an algorithm rewards [20]. An employee may therefore appear compliant while privately questioning legitimacy, experimenting with behavior, or preserving concealed alternatives. The same response can also vary across monitoring purposes: safety monitoring may be accepted while productivity ranking is negotiated or resisted.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in how employees respond to digital monitoring and datafied control.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in How Employees Respond to Digital Monitoring and Datafied Control.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Observability to compliance	Visible specified task	Accountability	Task clarity	Bounded adherence	Concurrent change	Replicated field tests
Restriction to reactance	Intrusive surveillance	Freedom-threat appraisal	Legitimacy	Unstable conformity	Prior distrust	Longitudinal mediation
Surveillance–concealment loop	Coercive monitoring	Invisibility and managerial inference	Trust	Escalating control	Task necessity	Comparative process studies
Opacity to experimentation	Hidden evaluation	Inferential learning	Dependence	Strategic adaptation	Market uncertainty	Within-person observation
Breakdown to negotiation	Coordination failure	Collaborative repair	Manager access	Modified enactment	Managerial pragmatism	Cross-setting comparison
Grievance to resistance	Shared problem	Solidarity and coordination	Institutions	Collective challenge	Pre-existing organization	Network and longitudinal designs
Uncertainty to provisional compliance	Opaque expectations	Anticipatory adaptation	Economic dependence	Temporary alignment	Known incentives	Event-based longitudinal tests
Resistance to altered control	Worker challenge	Reciprocal adjustment	Timing and visibility	Changed response pattern	External regulation	Multilevel process tests

Workers under algorithmic management also use heterogeneous coping strategies, indicating that one exposure does not yield a uniform response [21]. Resource access, perceived control, occupational norms, and alternative employment may influence whether a worker accommodates, hides, negotiates, or coordinates with others. These conditions are plausible moderators, but available qualitative evidence does not establish the prevalence, ordering, or duration of response types.

Transitions may also be recursive. Control practices can change after worker resistance, and altered control can generate new forms of accommodation or opposition [22]. The proposed theory therefore allows movement in multiple directions. Failed negotiation may encourage collective resistance; credible managerial response may shift concealment toward negotiation; intensified sanctions or dependence may move overt opposition toward provisional compliance. These are conceptual paths, not demonstrated transition probabilities. External regulation, labor-market change, leadership turnover, or ordinary job stress may explain apparent movement and must be tested as rivals.

Temporal analysis also requires an appropriate unit of observation. A response may change within one shift, across a performance cycle, or after successive policy changes. Cross-sectional measures can capture an attitude or current tactic but cannot determine whether compliance followed failed negotiation or preceded concealment. Testing the proposed transitions therefore requires repeated observations tied to identifiable monitoring events and changes in organizational response.

Proposed employee-response typology

The proposed Employee-Response Typology integrates response visibility, locus of agency, orientation toward control, rule engagement, and temporal stability. Its construction requires separation of individual, team, and organizational levels; attention to employment-relations arrangements; and recognition that consent and resistance can coexist within labor-control regimes [23-25]. These foundations prevent the four types from becoming psychological labels detached from the authority and dependency structures in which action occurs.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for employee-response typology, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

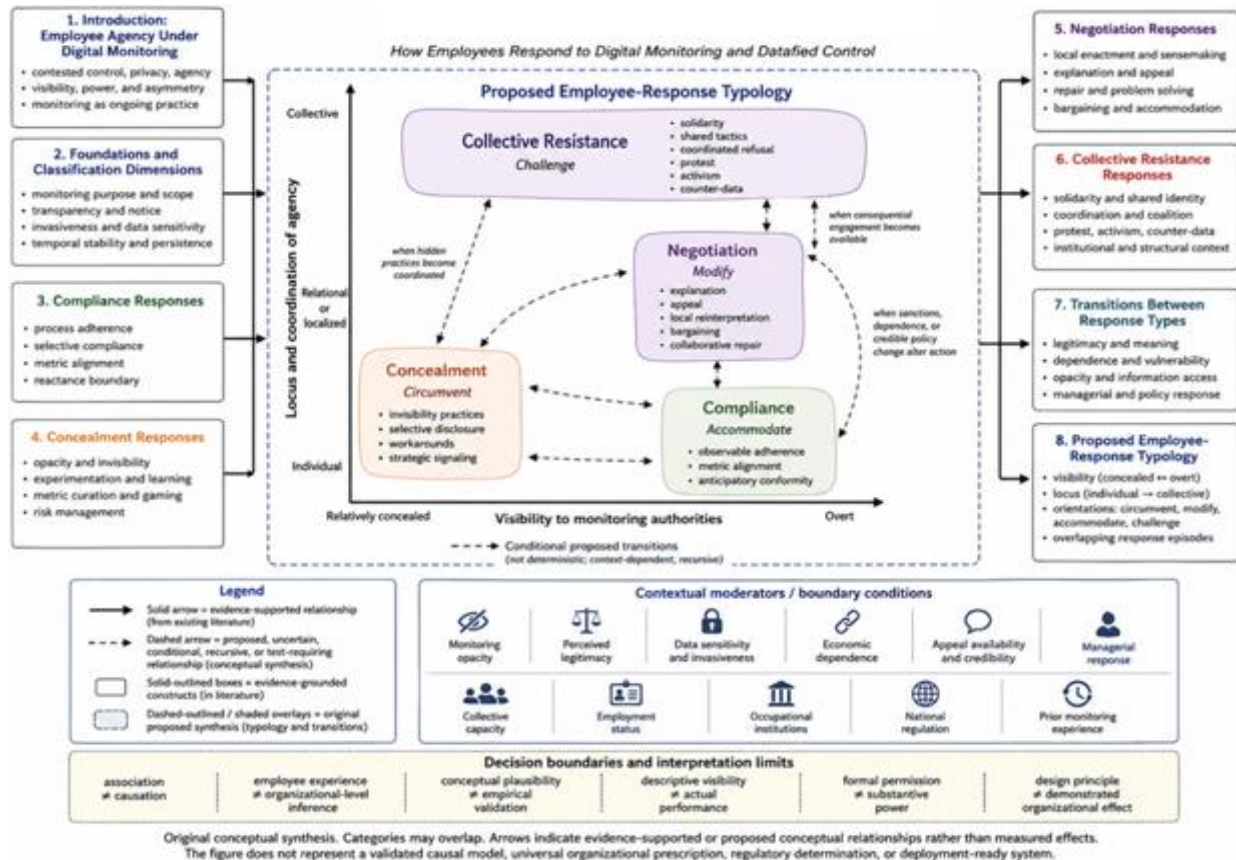


Figure 1. Employee-Response Typology

Compliance occupies the relatively visible and primarily individual region because the monitored requirement is outwardly met. Concealment occupies the less visible individual region because agency is exercised by curating or redirecting observability. The boundary is permeable: anticipatory compliance can remain provisional [20], while concealment can accompany visible adherence when workers protect unmeasured activity [11]. Neither response establishes a stable identity or a general evaluation of monitoring.

Negotiation is relatively overt and relational because it seeks modification through another actor, whereas collective resistance requires coordination around a shared challenge. Collaborative repair demonstrates that negotiation may preserve managerial control [16]. Solidarity evidence shows that collective action depends on relational and institutional capacity [17]. The difference is therefore not simply civility versus conflict, but the locus of action, target of influence, and degree to which authority itself is challenged.

Dashed pathways in the proposed model indicate conditional movement, not causal effects. Control and resistance may recursively reshape one another [22], but movement also depends on legitimacy, opacity, dependence, appeal credibility, managerial response, collective capacity, employment status, and institutional context. The typology should be tested against overlapping categories and rival classifications. It does not claim that every employee progresses through the four types or that any response is inherently more effective, ethical, or mature.

The unit classified by the typology is a response episode, not the whole employee. This prevents a person from being labeled “compliant” or “resistant” across all issues and times. It also permits different actors within a team to occupy different response domains simultaneously. Team- or organization-level patterns require evidence of shared interpretation, coordination, or institutionalization rather than aggregation of individual questionnaire scores.

Implications for monitoring design

The typology reframes employee responses as information about the monitoring arrangement rather than as simple acceptance or deviance. Monitoring design should examine whether opacity, categorization, pervasive surveillance, or asymmetrical control generates avoidable risks for employees and organizations [26]. Concealment may reveal that metrics omit necessary work, but it may also reflect opportunism. Resistance may indicate illegitimate authority, but it may also arise from disagreement with a justified safety rule. Response patterns should therefore prompt diagnosis rather than automatic moral classification.

Design review should specify the monitoring purpose, data collected, inferences produced, decision authority, retention conditions, and available routes for correction. Algorithm-based HR decisions may threaten personal integrity when employees cannot understand classifications, participate meaningfully, preserve appropriate self-presentation, or obtain accountable human judgment [27]. These principles establish ethical boundaries, not validated intervention effects. Formal explanation is insufficient when employees lack the power to correct an error or influence consequential use.

Monitoring governance also requires organizational judgment beyond technical accuracy. A system can classify consistently while institutionalizing excessive visibility, distorted incentives, or recursive distrust. Virtue-ethics scholarship suggests that responsible people analytics depends on organizational practices capable of interrupting harmful cycles rather than relying only on technical controls [28]. This remains a conceptual governance argument, not proof that a particular design produces better outcomes.

Managers should consequently assess compliance against underlying work quality, investigate concealment without presuming misconduct, distinguish symbolic voice from effective negotiation, and recognize the institutional conditions required for collective representation. Invisibility practices can reinforce surveillance when managers interpret them only as defiance [11]. Collaborative repair may reveal correctable system failures [16]. Because control and resistance can co-evolve [22], design should be reviewed over time rather than authorized once. These implications are bounded design principles requiring contextual evaluation, not universal prescriptions or implementation-ready rules.

A response-sensitive review process would also compare formal policy with enacted practice. Monitoring may be described as developmental while supervisors use it punitively, or formally optional while employees perceive refusal as career-limiting. Such discrepancies can alter legitimacy without any change in software. Governance should therefore examine managerial use, employee experience, appeal outcomes, and secondary data use as separate objects rather than treating system installation as the complete intervention.

Conclusion

This Original Typology Article proposes a dynamic framework for explaining how employees respond to digital monitoring and datafied control. Compliance, concealment, negotiation, and collective resistance are treated as ideal-typical response domains organized by visibility, locus of agency, orientation toward control, rule engagement, and temporal stability. The framework separates compliance from consent and performance, concealment from misconduct, negotiation from merely formal voice, and collective resistance from aggregated dissatisfaction.

The temporal contribution is to conceptualize responses as potentially overlapping and reversible. Employees may change responses as legitimacy, opacity, dependence, managerial action, appeal credibility, collective capacity, and institutional conditions change. These proposed paths do not constitute causal estimates, stages, or validated classifications. Much of the available evidence is context-specific, and platform-work findings cannot be transferred automatically to conventional employment.

The typology offers a vocabulary for examining monitoring as an enacted authority relationship rather than only a technical capability. Its categories, dimensions, and transitions require longitudinal, multilevel, comparative, and field-experimental testing. Research should be capable of revising, combining, or rejecting the proposed framework. Until such validation exists, the typology is best understood as an evidence-bounded conceptual device for asking more precise questions about employee agency and monitoring design.

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