

AN ETHICAL DILEMMA*

After Megan Jones finished her BS degree in Management at The University of Rhode Island, she landed a great job with the “app” developing company Global App Creations (GAC). In her six months of training in Human Resources (HR) she faced challenges but enjoyed working with people and solving their problems.

On Monday morning Megan’s boss, Debbie, placed a 20-inch-thick personnel folder on her desk. “Megan, I want you to review these files and by Friday start the process of finding possible ethics violations. Some employees know this is coming, while others don’t have a clue. It’s your job to write them up for ethics violations and suggest whether you think some of them should go to legal as well. I will add my write-up to each one so you won’t be the only one making the decisions. For now, I’ll make the primary decisions, but sooner or later you’ll be in charge of these tasks. If you have any questions, just stop by and we can talk.”

That afternoon Megan began going through the files. Some were straightforward involving theft of office supplies, inappropriate remarks, and tardiness. GAC’s code was straightforward on such matters. Yet other events appeared confusing. One salesperson was getting an official reprimand for using a company car for personal activities. This didn’t make sense because all the salespeople drove company cars they took home after work. According to the file, the person visited a hospital 10 miles away every evening for the past month. Megan realized every GAC car was equipped with a GPS device. While she didn’t think it was illegal for companies to install tracking devices on items they owned, she heard having information about health or religion could become the basis of a lawsuit if the person’s employment was terminated.

The most shocking file Megan reviewed was that of another employee being fired for sharing confidential information with a competitor. The file contained reports on computer activity, cell phone usage, GPS tracking, and included audio and video of personal conversations, dinners, and hotel rooms. On Tuesday Megan went to Jeremy, who worked for the company for several years, and asked him if he knew of employee tracking at the company.

Jeremy responded, “Well, I have heard rumors that managers want to keep track of employees and monitor whether they share confidential information with competitors. I’ve also heard they monitor where each

employee goes through the GPS located in the company car.”

Megan felt uneasy. “Jeremy, is what they are doing legal? Can they track and monitor our every move and conversation?”

Jeremy shrugged. “As far as I know it’s legal, but I’ve never looked into the actual laws. I don’t know why a company should track my personal time outside the office. But what are we supposed to do about it? We all need a job, and each one comes with a price.”

On Thursday Megan met with Debbie and expressed her concerns about the information GAC collects through the employee tracking activities. After she finished, Debbie responded. “Don’t be so naive, Megan. You know as well as I do what employees do outside of work could legally hurt the company. It’s also necessary to make sure employees aren’t sharing confidential information with rivals. This is a competitive industry.”

“But what about this employee using the company car to visit his daughter in the hospital? It was outside work hours and I heard his daughter is sick. What about an individual’s right to privacy concerning medical records?”

Debbie brushed her concerns aside. “We don’t have access to anybody’s medical records. We got this from the GPS device in the company-owned car issued to him. We can’t make exceptions for these types of things. Our reputation for ethics is excellent.”

Then Debbie said, “I hope you haven’t spoken to anyone about these cases because that violates confidentiality. Your job is to review the files and suggest appropriate action. All files and communications about the files are confidential.”

QUESTIONS | EXERCISES

1. If tracking employees through technology is not illegal, why should Megan be concerned if she is not involved in any misconduct?
2. At this point, what are Megan’s alternatives to resolve her current dilemma about her involvement and knowledge about GAC’s tracking of employees?
3. Who should have a stake or an interest in how GAC tracks and monitors its employees?

*This case is strictly hypothetical; any resemblance to real persons, companies, or situations is coincidental.