

# Working from home or doing the ironing? Big boss is watching you

**Julianne Corr**

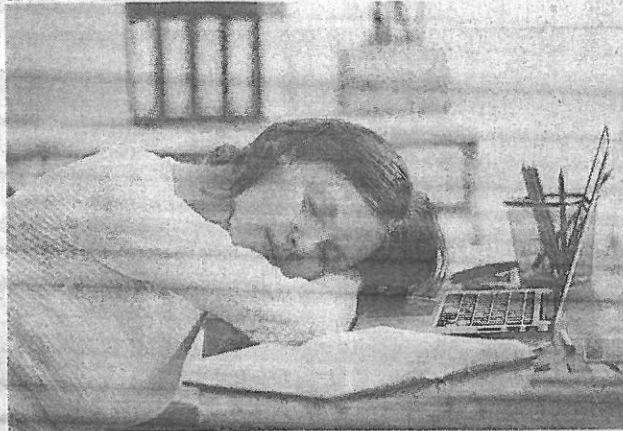
The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Ictu) has raised concerns about the use of surveillance software by employers to monitor staff working from home.

Media reports in the US suggest companies including the High Plains Journal, an agricultural trade newspaper, and Vonage, a telecoms outfit, are using such software for employee-monitoring purposes. Pragli and Prodscore are popular providers of the technology.

Laura Bambrick, social policy officer with Ictu, said employers often promoted the software as motivational, acting as a substitute for the manager being in the room as you work. "Your employer makes sure your camera is always turned on so they can be sure you're at your laptop, or they can run programs to time how long it takes you to respond to emails," she said.

"This sort of surveillance technique being used by employers is an area that trade unions are going to have to keep an eye on, to see

LEAH FARRELL



**Irish unions have expressed concern over surveillance**

how they develop. They may have to be regulated by legislation, and employment protections are going to have to be updated."

Employment law solicitor Richard Grogan said employers would want to ensure employees were using their work computers solely for work purposes, as well as monitoring that start and finish times were adhered to, along with breaks.

"Employees are kicking up about this quite a lot. The employer's counterargument

is that in the office they were going to check you anyway, so if you're not agreeing with this system then we can't have you home working. In reality, it is being used by employers to say, 'We might not always be checking, but we're giving ourselves the option to check.' The employer is saying, 'It's my machine and I want to know what was done on it.'"

Grogan agrees that if remote working continues at a high level after Covid restrictions are lifted, a

discussion must be had on monitoring it. "If you're going to have remote workers, you need to have some sort of monitoring in place," he said.

"One thing I don't want to see is civil servants deciding all the terms of the legislation without having a proper discussion with workers and business representatives. Employment lawyers need to be part of that process so we get something that works.

"Covid-19 has changed how we work. We've been scaling on a 19th-century model where you go to work and you come home. It's a chance to bring our workplaces into the 21st century."

Daragh O'Brien, managing director of Castlebridge, a data governance specialist, said some organisations using monitoring technologies might not understand the implications. "As remote working becomes part of the new normal, it's inevitable that organisations are going to want some way of managing staff. Unfortunately, they often opt for a technology fix rather than a management solution for remote working."

## CHINA'S AMBASSADOR DOWNPLAYS BLAME GAME

He Xiangdong, the Chinese ambassador to Ireland, has criticised the spread of "disinformation" about his country in relation to the origins of Covid-19, writes *Julianne Corr*.

In an advertisement in yesterday's Irish Independent, headlined "Blame game: wrong and harmful remedy to Covid-19", He claimed some populist politicians are using

the pandemic as a political tool to blame China for the spread of the virus, such as saying that it originated in a Chinese laboratory.

The embassy said that the article had been written because "during the past few months of the pandemic, all kinds of disinformation [about] Covid-19 is spreading in different forms".

It said: "The article is not intended to [be] directed at anyone. But if you want to find one, I would say all those who cook up and spread disinformation."

He, who was appointed China's ambassador to Ireland in May 2019, cited ways in which China has co-operated with the World Health Organisation and other countries by sharing



**He Xiangdong: hitting back**

its medical information on Covid-19.

"Blaming China for the pandemic is as blaming the first victims who were hit by the first wave of a flood. No country was caught more unprepared by this new virus than China. While fighting its own battle, China has spared no efforts to

strengthen international co-operation against the pandemic," said He.

Blaming China for the increasing number of cases of Covid-19 in countries far away from Wuhan was "politically motivated nonsense", he added.

"While we are all working for a future of recovery, we should also prevent political viruses from distracting and delaying the necessary global response, otherwise we will be led to nowhere but the deep gutter."

In what might have been a swipe at the US president Donald Trump, He concluded: "Blame game is a wrong remedy to Covid-19 and is as harmful as recommending that people shall inject disinfectant into their lungs."