

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into workplace surveillance

East Melbourne – Monday 23 September 2024

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

John Mullahy

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Dylan Wight

Anthony Cianflone

Jess Wilson

Wayne Farnham

WITNESSES

Luke Simpkins, Chief Executive Officer *(via teleconference)*, Laundry Association Australia;

Michael Johns, Chief Executive Officer, Bundle Australia;

Christopher Murphy, Director, Spindle Australia/New Zealand; and

Alison Smith, Manager, People and Culture, SPL.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into workplace surveillance. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website. I will just remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking just to minimise the interference.

Thank you so much to those who have joined us. Our witnesses Chris and Alison I can see, and Michael.

I will just quickly introduce myself and the Committee. I am the Chair, Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine. We have Deputy Chair Kim O'Keeffe from Shepparton; Anthony Cianflone from Pascoe Vale; Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan; and John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

We really appreciate the submission that you have made to the Committee and your joining us today for some further questions. I am not sure who would like to maybe give an opening statement, but I will give you a little bit of time, maybe 3 or 4 minutes, just to talk a little bit to your submission, and then we might jump straight into some questions. I am not sure who would like to start us off.

Alison SMITH: No takers, it seems.

The CHAIR: We can just jump straight into questions, because we have read your submission. If you are happy to do that, we can go straight to it.

Secretariat: Sorry, Chair, can I just ask: are we expecting Luke Simpkins, the CEO of Laundry Association Australia?

Michael JOHNS: Yes. I was just going to mention that. Yes, we are.

Alison SMITH: He would make our opening submission.

Michael JOHNS: He would make the opening submission, yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. All right. In the absence of Luke, I might suggest that we start with a question just to kick us off, and then if Luke joins us, we are more than happy for him to jump in and give us more of a statement. I might start, then, with that question while we are waiting for Luke. Maybe if you could talk a little bit about the technology that you are using or how you are seeing it being used in your industry at the moment and how that is really aligning with your objectives of productivity.

Alison SMITH: I can talk to that. We use Spindle and Bundle to set our KPIs within the laundry, and then it reflects how the staff are performing. It then identifies where further training is required for some staff.

The CHAIR: And what does the technology look like, Alison?

Alison SMITH: Chris might like to talk to that one.

Christopher MURPHY: Yes. Pretty much what this technology does is automate data collection that has been done manually for years. Typically what happens is we focus on a simple acronym PPE—people, process, equipment—and what we tend to do with this software is focus on the process of how things are being processed at the facility. Then we look at equipment and then we look at the human aspect of it with the employees. We try to focus on the employees—they are the most important asset within a facility—and making sure that standards and things within the facility are fair and reasonable and trying to just look at the work floor digitally and trying to take that manual tracking that has been done for years and just automate that so the operators and the management teams at the sites can make real-time decisions.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you for that. Luke, thank you so much for joining us. I can see you have joined us by phone. We were talking about whether there were any opening remarks that you would like to make first before we jump into questions. Luke, is there anything you would like to start us off with?

Luke SIMPKINS: Okay. I think you have already gotten into it, so that is very good. I think we can just carry on with questions, really.

The CHAIR: That is absolutely fine. We have read the submission, Luke. It was just really to give you an opportunity if you wanted to, so that is completely fine. Anthony, we might go to you for the next question.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks for appearing, and thank you for your submission. I want to note as well that I think you are one of the few employer groups that has been good enough to make a submission and appear. I would just like to acknowledge and thank you for that. The submission I have gone through is quite strong in the sense of it coming from obviously the employer perspective around justifying the need for workplace surveillance from a performance point of view. But at the same time, I think it is fair to acknowledge that many of the people that work in your sector or in your industry are actually some of the most vulnerable, lower skilled and lowly paid workers compared to many other sectors. We heard in previous hearings a couple of weeks ago from the unions about where workplace surveillance, sadly, has actually been used against their own interests and OH&S interests.

I guess my question is around noting the importance of the technology from a performance point of view. What is your view around the Victorian Government and this committee making recommendations in a fair, equitable and sensible way that also protect the interests of vulnerable, low-paid workers?

Michael JOHNS: If you like, I will answer that one. I am Michael Johns. I am the CEO of Bundle. We work with the industry both in Australia and New Zealand and around the world. I am actually sitting in London at the moment, so we have quite a large footprint around the world. We see this happening or this technology being used quite regularly. We do not see it as a stick for the employees. Most of the information we see from this is actually improving process. We see it as making sure we have got stocked process, making sure we are not having breakdowns and making sure that things are working as they should within the laundry. I would suggest that 60 per cent of productivity actually comes from the management of the team, as opposed to the performance of the operators. That is quite noticeable, especially when we go into an assisted workplace, an assisted work team. Someone who has a job—they are not working at full capacity at any time, but the benefit they see in this is that they are actually looking at PBs all the time, personal bests. So they love to be able to monitor or measure themselves against their friends, against their colleagues and against what they have done previously. This is a positive piece of technology. It is not a stick.

Luke SIMPKINS: Alison, would you like to add anything to that from the business's perspective?

Alison SMITH: I would 100 per cent agree. We certainly do not use it as a stick. I have not yet seen it used as a stick. I have not seen any staff complain about the systems that we use. It is more about helping us to see areas of improvement and help the staff to achieve those where required.

Michael JOHNS: To reiterate what Chris mentioned previously, all we are doing is automating data that has historically been captured on a piece of paper and a spreadsheet. It is normal. It is an automation of data; it is not a different process or anything other than that.

The CHAIR: Thank you for answering that question. Thank you, Anthony. I might go to you, Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for appearing today. I have got a couple of questions. Just on the points that you raised there, one thing that raised my eyebrows when you leaned into what you were talking about then is that it creates a bit of employee competition to get their numbers up. First off, do you get concerned that that could impede workplace safety, if you have got staff competing against each other? The other question I have got is: with your data collection, do you pass on that data collection? Do you sell that data collection?

Michael JOHNS: Again I am happy to step in. The competition is friendly. The last thing we want people doing—actually, I will take a step back. The one thing we see is it is not about speed of processing, it is about consistency of processing. You are far better to work at a consistent level of productivity as opposed to peaks

and troughs. Because of that, we do not see that level of competition where people are trying to outpace each other, but people want to see how well they are going. It is just a natural response.

On the second point, then, Wayne, 100 per cent of that data stays in house. We do not even use it internally ourselves. We provide it to our laundries, and they are the ones that then manage the performance of their team, the productivity of their equipment, the monitoring of their utilities. It is not data that goes into the marketplace.

Wayne FARNHAM: Who owns the data?

Michael JOHNS: The commercial laundries own the data in all cases.

Wayne FARNHAM: Okay. Thank you.

Christopher MURPHY: I will step in here. Another really unique thing about this is you can actually discount individual employees separately. Say if somebody is on light duty and you are a team member, you can discount their performance by 50 per cent. They are still processing just like they are, and then they see the same performance metrics as the other team members on there. We see it a lot as team collaboration, and it actually helps out the facility because it takes you to a level higher, where the supervisors and the managers can actually talk to the whole team that is processing and say, 'We are processing 50 pieces an hour; what is going on here?' And typically what we find is there is a lot of moving around. Like you said, those safety aspects within the factory limit the employees, you know, moving around, doing different processes, different jobs. If you keep them in one area, you limit those workplace mishaps and things that happen when it comes to safety.

Alison SMITH: Correct. And we also have our team leaders and floor supervisors ensuring that our staff are working safely, and if anyone sees anyone doing anything unsafely, then we will retrain them to perform it in the correct way.

Christopher MURPHY: And one more thing about this is that this is not cameras and things like that. This is just datasets and counts that, like we have said, are raised on the machine, and we are just digitising the manual data and saving one person spending 3 hours a day—depending on how many shifts you have—running around to each machine and each employee collecting that data manually.

The CHAIR: Luke?

Luke SIMPKINS: I was just going to say that if the Committee or any member of the Committee would like to actually go and have a bit of a closer look at a laundry around Melbourne or around Victoria, that is always a possibility. We are certainly happy to facilitate that.

Wayne FARNHAM: Well, I have got two big laundries in Warragul, so I will take you up on that offer.

Luke SIMPKINS: Sounds good—I am sure we will be able to sort that out when you like.

Wayne FARNHAM: That would be good.

The CHAIR: Perfect. Thank you, Luke, for the offer. That might be helpful for the Committee as well. Kim, I reckon we have got time for one more question. I might go to you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you, and thank you so much for your submission. It is really great to hear from a business and what you are actually doing. I suppose my question is: how is this marketed to your employers in regard to their expectations around this data? That is one question. The other thing would be around the training. If workplace surveillance laws were introduced in Victoria, what assistance and training would employers and you need to ensure you are compliant? Did you keep up with that, sorry? I had two.

Alison SMITH: All good. When we have new staff they get a tour of the laundry so they can see firsthand what is happening, and it is explained at that point that these are our systems that monitor KPIs and how they are progressing through the day. Then throughout their training period obviously they do not know how to use the machines, so they will see that their numbers are not as high as everyone else's. They will work through that, and we provide the training. We go through—what do we have? I cannot remember the name, but we do have a training program, so they tick through all of that. That is done like that. In terms of the training we would need if these laws came into place, I think there would be significant training required.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you for that. I suppose, getting back to that first question, it is more about if that would impact on someone wanting to come into that workplace, if they felt there was that level of expectation. But by the sound of it your induction is very fair and reasonable and they are very aware of the expectations. Would that be correct?

Alison SMITH: Yes.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you so much. I will stress how it has given us today a really different perspective. I really do appreciate you making a submission and then also coming to answer some questions today. Luke, thank you also for the offer; we may take you up on that. I am sorry we have run out of time to ask more questions, but I think we will come back to you at some point. Thank you so much for your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.