

Shops using fingerprints to check staff

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Independent shopkeepers are using fingerprint recognition technology to check that staff are working their full hours.

A small group of retailers trading under the Budgens and Costcutter names have introduced the technology to prevent staff entering false clock-in times for each other, so called "buddy punching".

A further 20 Budgens stores are considering introducing the scheme after the success of the pilot, according to Pushpendra Jhala, chief executive of Nivid, which developed the finger print recognition technology.

"The loss of revenue through fake attendances accounts for the largest percentage of loss to retailers," Mr Jhala said. "Biometrics has helped a number of conglomerates in the retail environment, including shops, hotels and restaurants, to transform their operations by reducing overheads."

Erongrove, which owns and operates two of the six Budgens stores to have piloted the scheme, says buddy punching can cost small shops thousands of pounds in lost wages. Utpal Patel, director of Erongrove, estimated that his company's two stores, which employ 25 people, would save £10,000 a year from installing fingerprint recognition terminals.

"We are able to ensure we are getting work for the hours we're paying and that our budget money is being spent on investment in stores," Mr Patel said.

The scheme provides the latest example of employers using new technology to prevent potential abuses by customers and staff.

James Plaskitt, work and pensions minister, said last week that a programme to check voice stress levels to catch benefit fraudsters was to be extended to a further 15 local authority areas. Harrow in north-west London, one of 14 local authorities that originally piloted the scheme, said it was saving about £50,000 a month.

Digilog, which supplies voice risk analysis technology to local authorities, says the technique is widely used by the insurance industry to uncover fraudulent claims - customers included Provident, Halifax and Esure.com.

GMB, Britain's third largest union, complains that some employers are using tracking devices and monitoring computer keyboard strokes to control staff, including checking how long they take for toilet breaks.

Paul Kenny, the union's general secretary, said using employees' fingerprints to check on time-keeping was "another example of the creeping "dataveillance" - data surveillance - that was "pervading British industry". He said: "GMB has no objection to using technology, but it needs to be debated."

A study in the US by Nucleus Research, information technology consultants, estimated that eliminating buddy punching could save employers "an average of 2.2 per cent of their gross payroll", worth about \$4m (£2m) a year for a company with 5,000 employees.

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