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Shortcomings of punch-card system

ONE of the first directives issued by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad after becoming Prime Minister 21 years ago was the need to introduce a punch-card system for civil servants.

The system, to "effectively monitor the movements" of civil servants, is to ensure they report for work on time and leave only after putting in the required hours.

The system replaced the manual registration of attendance.

Under the punch-card system, the time an employee arrives and leaves the office will be automatically punched onto the card, which is replaced every month.

These cards are to be kept in a rack near the machine.

Each floor will have one machine, to be placed at the entrance or exit points.

The cardinal rule is that employees are not allowed to punch the cards of their colleagues, be it their subordinates or superiors, under any circumstances.

To ensure the system's effectiveness, the heads of department are to assign officers to supervise employees clocking in and out every working day.

There should be a list of such officers and they should be assigned for not more than a week at a time as the particular officer must arrive before the others and be the last to leave.

However, checks conducted by the NST and feedback received reveal that in most cases, no officers are assigned to be on duty at the punch-card machines either in the mornings or evenings.

This allows employees to clock in for their colleagues who are late or have taken the morning off to run personal errands.

In some instances, punch-card machines are placed where the guards are stationed.

However, the guards, usually from security companies, have no business to reprimand employees who punch the cards for others.

They may also want to maintain their good working relationship with employees of a particular department and maintain the win-win situation.

A department head, who declined to be named, says there is simply no control when it comes to card-punching.

The main problem, he admits, is late-comers getting their colleagues to punch their cards for them.

On why an officer was not assigned to monitor this, he says: "We cannot spare one person to do just this."

He adds that it is also difficult to prove if an employee punched the cards for his colleagues.

Some punch-card machines may be located at the entrance but due to the office structure, they are put up in secluded areas like the entrances to toilets.

This again allows any individual, including those from other departments, to help punch cards for friends.

It conveniently defeats the objective of installing such machines in Government departments.

Under the system introduced in 1981, those leaving the office for assignments are required to state the reasons for doing so in the card and get it authorised by the superior.

If they are unable to return to the office the same day, they are required to get the authorisation the next day.

However, according to another civil servant, this rule is never followed.

"No one really cares. It's like the machine is put there for show only," he says, adding that this has made a mockery of the entire system.

The rules also stipulate that disciplinary action can be taken against those who come in to work late several times.

If the employee gets three or more red prints in a month and is unable to give a proper explanation, his yellow card will be changed to green one.

And if a green card holder gets two more red prints on his card, and his explanation is rejected, he will be given a warning and his card will be changed to a red one.

The moment he gets one red print on the red card, disciplinary action can be taken against him under the General Orders.

It will be interesting to know how many civil servants have actually been hauled up by the disciplinary boards and how many were sacked for breaching rules related to the punch-card system.

With most of them working hand in hand for a win-win situation, and thanks to mobile phone technology, what you will probably get is an excellent service record.