

You will get chipped — eventually

Jefferson Graham, USA TODAY Published 12:38 p.m. ET Aug. 9, 2017 | Updated 9:17 a.m. ET



After a Wisconsin firm embedded microchips in its employees, social media wants to know—is my company next? Jefferson Graham has the answer, on #TalkingTech.



(Photo: Jeff Baenen, AP)

LOS ANGELES — You will get chipped. It's just a matter of time.

In the aftermath of a Wisconsin firm embedding microchips in employees last week to ditch company badges and corporate logons, the Internet has entered into full-throated debate.

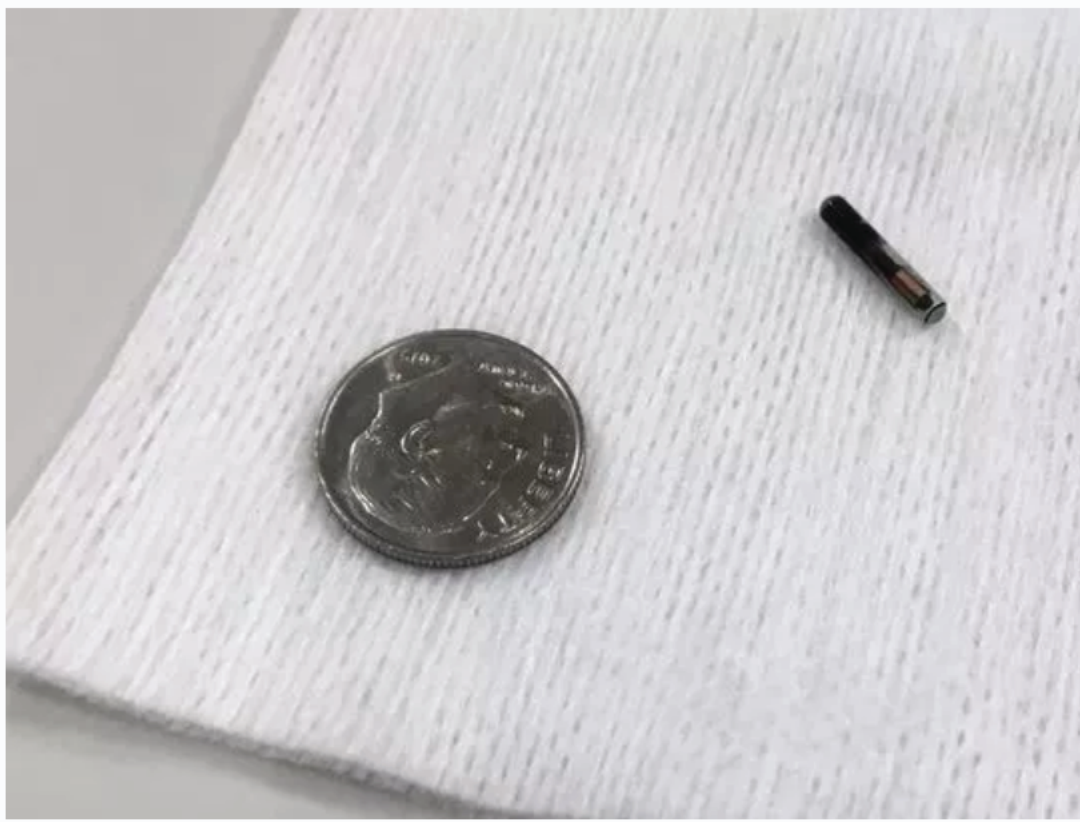
Religious activists are so appalled, they've been penning nasty 1-star reviews of the company, Three Square Market, on Google, Glassdoor and social media.

On the flip side, seemingly everyone else wants to know: Is this what real life is going to be like soon at work? Will I be chipped?

"It will happen to everybody," says Noelle Chesley, 49, associate professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "But not this year, and not in 2018. Maybe not my generation, but certainly that of my kids."

Gene Munster, an investor and analyst at Loup Ventures, is an advocate for augmented reality, virtual reality and other new technologies. He thinks embedded chips in human bodies is 50 years away. "In 10 years, Facebook, Google, Apple and Tesla will not have their employees chipped," he says. "You'll see some extreme forward-looking tech people adopting it, but not large companies."

The idea of being chipped has too "much negative connotation" today, but by 2067 "we will have been desensitized by the social stigma," Munster says.



A microchip is shown compared with a dime Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2017, at Three Square Market in River Falls, Wis., (Photo: Jeff Baenen, AP)

For now, Three Square Market, or 32M, hasn't offered concrete benefits for getting chipped beyond badge and log-on stats. Munster says it was a "PR stunt" for the company to get attention to its product and it certainly succeeded, getting the small start-up air play on CBS, NBC and ABC, and generating headlines worldwide. The company, which sells corporate cafeteria kiosks designed to replace vending machines, would like the kiosks to handle cashless transactions.

This would go beyond paying with your smartphone. Instead, chipped customers would simply wave their hands in lieu of Apple Pay and other mobile-payment systems.

The benefits don't stop there. In the future, consumers could zip through airport scanners sans passport or drivers license; open doors; start cars; and operate home automation systems. All of it, if the technology pans out, with the simple wave of a hand.

Not a GPS tracker

The embedded chip is not a GPS tracker, which is what many critics initially feared. However, analysts believe future chips will track our every move.

For example, pets for years have been embedded with chips to store their name and owner contact. Indeed, 32M isn't the first company to embed chips in employees. In 2001, Applied Digital Solutions installed the "VeriChip" to access medical records but the company eventually changed hands and stopped selling the chip in 2010.

In Sweden, BioHax says nearly 3,000 customers have had its chip embedded to do many things, including ride the national rail system without having to show the conductor a ticket.

In the U.S., Dangerous Things, a Seattle-based firm, says it has sold "tens of thousands" of chips to consumers via its website. The chip and installation cost about \$200.

After years of being a subculture, "the time is now" for chips to be more commonly used, says Amal Graafstra, founder of Dangerous Things. "We're going to start to see chip implants get the same realm of acceptance as piercings and tattoos do now."

In other words, they'll be more visible, but not mainstream yet.

"It becomes part of you the way a cellphone does," Graafstra says. "You can never forget it, and you can't lose it. And you have the capability to communicate with machines in a way you couldn't before."

But after what we saw in Wisconsin last week, what's next for the U.S. workforce? A nation of workers chipping into their pods at Federal Express, General Electric, IBM, Microsoft and other top corporations?

Experts contend consumers will latch onto chips before companies do.

Chesley says corporations are slower to respond to massive change and that there will be an age issue. Younger employees will be more open to it, while older workers will balk. "Most employers who have inter-generational workforces might phase it in slowly," she says. "I can't imagine people my age and older being enthusiastic about having devices put into their bodies."

Adds Alec Levenson, a researcher at University of Southern California's Center for Effective Organizations, "The vast majority of people will not put up with this."

Three Square Market said the chips are voluntary, but Chesley says that if a company announces a plan to be chipped, the expectation is that you will get chipped — or risk losing out on advancement, raises and being a team player.

"That's what we're worried about," says Bryan Allen, chief of staff for state Rep. Tina Davis (D), who is introducing a bill in Pennsylvania to outlaw mandatory chip embedding. "If the tech is out there, what's to stop an employer from saying either you do this, or you can't work here anymore."

Several states have passed similar laws, while one state recently saw a similar bill die in committee. "I see this as a worker's rights issue," says Nevada state Sen. Becky Harris (R), who isn't giving up. "This is the wrong place to be moving," she says.

Should future corporations dive in to chipping their employees, they will have huge issues of "trust" to contend with, says Kent Grayson, a professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

"You've got to have a lot of trust to put one of those in your body," Grayson says. Workers will need assurances the chip is healthy, can't be hacked, and its information is private, he says.

Meanwhile, religious advocates have taken to social media to express their displeasure about chipping, flooding 32M's Facebook page with comments like "boycott," "completely unnecessary" and "deplorable." On 32M's Google page, Amy Cosari a minister in Hager City, Wisc., urges employees to remove the chip.

"When Jesus was raised, he was raised body and soul, and it was him, not zombie, not a ghost and we are raised up in the same way," Cosari wrote. "Employees of 32Market, you are not a walking debit card."

Get used to it, counsels Chesley.

Ten years ago, employees didn't look at corporate e-mail over the weekend. Now they we do, "whether we like it or not," he says.

Be it wearable technology or an embedded chip, the always on-always connected chip is going to be part of our lives, she says.