

Los Angeles Times

Companies start implanting microchips into workers' bodies



The company's co-founder said the chip's greatest benefit is its convenience. (Sign up for our free video newsletter here <http://bit.ly/2n6VKPR>)

By **Associated Press**

APRIL 3, 2017, 10:15 AM | REPORTING FROM STOCKHOLM

The syringe slides in between the thumb and index finger. Then, with a click, a microchip is injected in the employee's hand. Another “cyborg” is created.

What could pass for a dystopian vision of the workplace is almost routine at the Swedish start-up hub Epicenter. The company offers to implant its workers and start-up members with microchips the size of grains of rice that function as swipe cards: to open doors, operate printers or buy smoothies with a wave of the hand.

“The biggest benefit, I think, is convenience,” said Patrick Mesterton, co-founder and chief executive of Epicenter. As a demonstration, he unlocks a door merely by waving near it. “It basically replaces a lot of things you have, other communication devices, whether it be credit cards or keys.”

The technology itself is not new: Such chips are used as virtual collar plates for pets, and companies use them to track deliveries. But never before has the technology been used to tag employees on a broad scale. Epicenter and a handful of other companies are the first to make chip implants broadly available.

And as with most new technologies, it raises security and privacy issues. Although the chips are biologically safe, the data they generate can show how often employees come to work or what they buy. Unlike company swipe cards or smartphones, which can generate the same data, people cannot easily separate themselves from the chips.

“Of course, putting things into your body is quite a big step to do, and it was even for me at first,” said Mesterton, saying he initially had his doubts.

“On the other hand, I mean, people have been implanting things into their body, like pacemakers and stuff to control your heart,” he said. “That's a way, way more serious thing than having a small chip that can actually communicate with devices.”

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Elon Musk's Neuralink brain chips might someday fight the robot uprising

Epicenter, which is home to more than 100 companies and roughly 2,000 workers, began implanting workers in January 2015. Now, about 150 workers have the chips. A company based in Belgium also offers its employees such implants, and there are isolated cases around the world in which tech enthusiasts have tried them out in recent years.

The small implants use near-field communication technology, or NFC, the same as in contactless credit cards or mobile payments. When activated by a reader a few inches away, a small amount of data flows between the two devices via electromagnetic waves. The implants are “passive,” meaning they contain information that other devices can read, but cannot read information themselves.

Ben Libberton, a microbiologist at Stockholm's Karolinska Institute, says hackers could conceivably gain huge swaths of information from embedded microchips. The ethical dilemmas will become bigger the more sophisticated the microchips become.

“The data that you could possibly get from a chip that is embedded in your body is a lot different from the data that you can get from a smartphone,” he says. “Conceptually, you could get data about your health, you could get data about your whereabouts, how often you're working, how long you're working, if you're taking toilet breaks and things like that.”

Libberton said that if such information is collected, the big question remains of what happens to it, who uses it and for what purpose.

So far, Epicenter's group of cyborgs doesn't seem too concerned.

“People ask me, ‘Are you chipped?’ and I say, ‘Yes, why not?’” said Fredric Kaijser, the 47-year-old chief experience officer at Epicenter. “And they all get excited about privacy issues and what that means and so forth. And for me it's just a matter of I like to try new things and just see it as more of an enabler and what that would bring into the future.”

Epicenter workers stage monthly events where attendees can receive the implant.

That means visits from self-described “body hacker” Jowan Osterlund from Biohax Sweden who performs the “operation.”

He injects the implants — using pre-loaded syringes — into the fleshy area of the hand, just next to the thumb. The process lasts a few seconds, and more often than not, there are no screams and barely a drop of blood. “The next step for electronics is to move into the body,” he says.

Sandra Haglof, 25, who works for Eventomatic, an events company that works with Epicenter, has had three piercings before, and her left hand barely shakes as Osterlund injects the chip.

“I want to be part of the future,” she laughs.

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